King of the DELTA BLUES

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The Life and Music of CHARLIE PATTON

by Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow

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Heavily retouched portrait of Charlie Patton dating to c.1908.

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BY STEPHEN CALT AND GAYLE WARDLOW

ROCK CHAPEL PRESS

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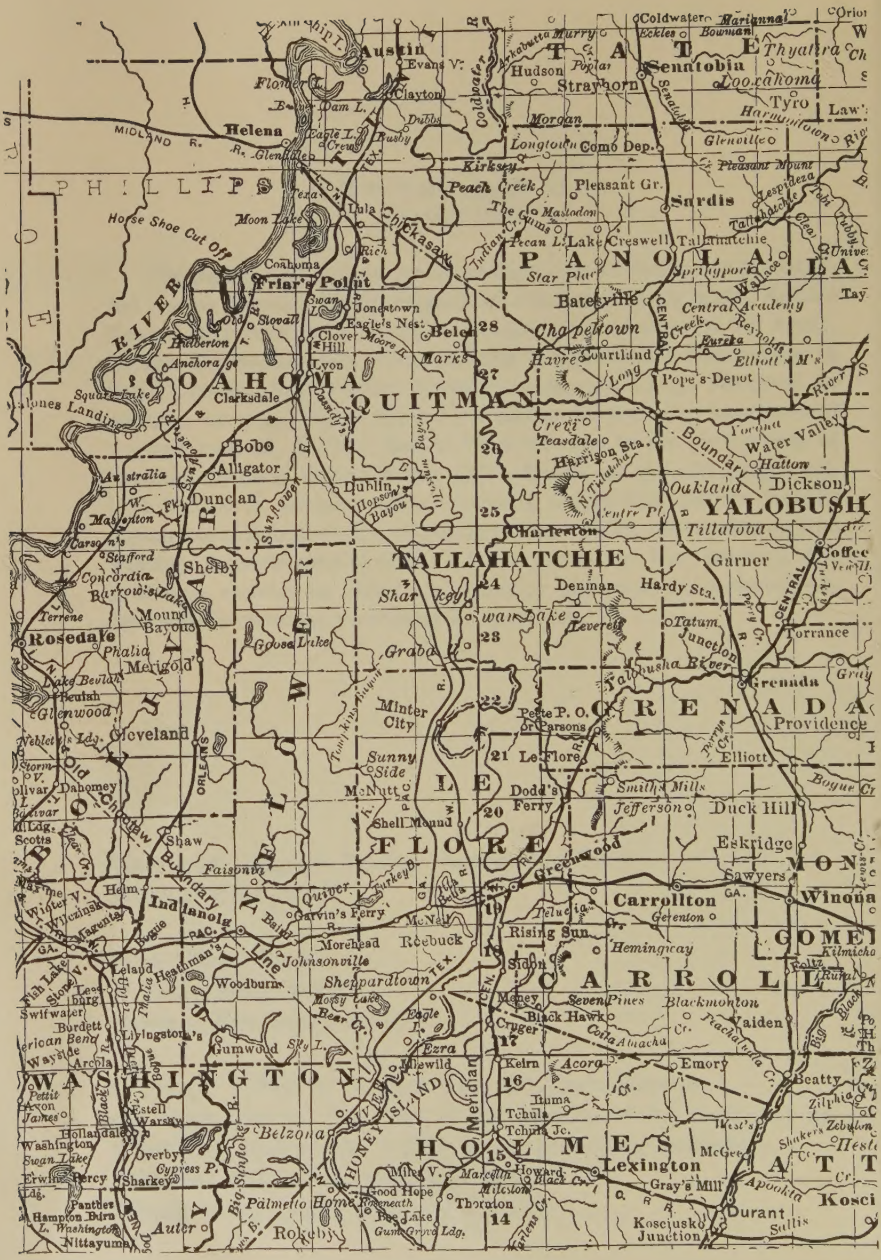
To Maggie and Nick Perls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Black Cr.
Seven Pines
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Anchorage
Hatberton
Squaw Lake
Jones Landing
Stafford
Concordia
Burrowsville
Mound Bayous
Phalia
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Shelby
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Coldwater River
Sunflower River
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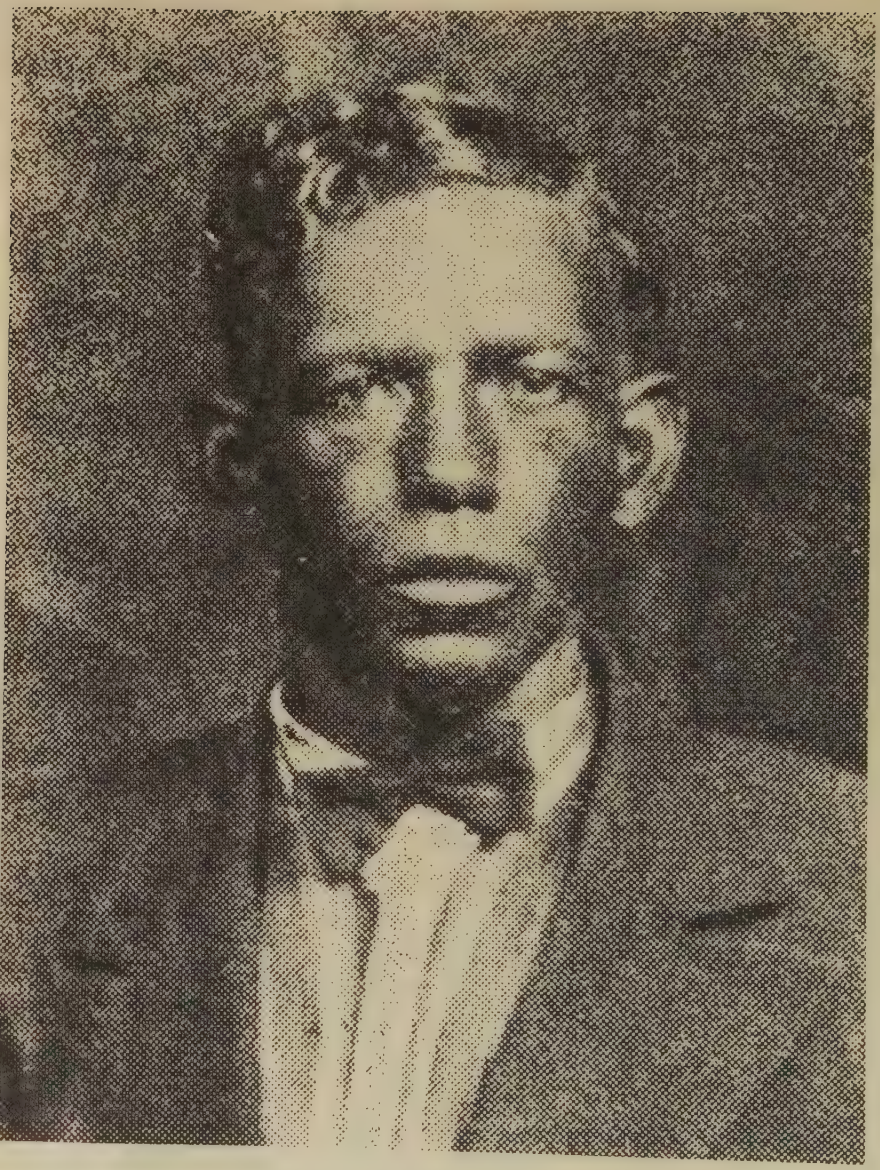


Charlie Patton, Paramount Records catalog from c.1929.

Mister Patton

"I don't reckon nobody will ever beat him,
in my judgement."—Booker Miller

The foreman of *Dockery's* plantation scarcely knew what to make of the short stranger in the blue business suit who had driven nearly a hundred miles of dirt road to the heart of the Mississippi Delta on so frivolous an errand. The man carried no business card, and it was hardly the usual or even proper business for a white man to inquire after a black plantation tenant—unless he was the county sheriff from Indianola arriving (always at the owner's request) to break up a Saturday night fracas, a state policeman looking for one of the Parchman Farm escapees who sometimes hid out on the northern fringe of the plantation, or a revenue agent in search of a hidden still. The only other outsiders who were likely to interest themselves in the affairs of Will Dockery's labor force were labor agents representing northern industries or rival plantations. But what labor agent would ever brazenly visit a plantation like *Dockery's* or seek the services of a man like Charlie Patton, who had twice been thrown off the place for being a trouble-maker?

Defensively, the man explained how Patton had sent a letter to his music store in Jackson requesting an audition for a record company, and how he was engaged in the business of referring black musicians to such companies. Then he drew in his breath. In his three years of working as a free-lance "talent-broker" (his own term for his off-hours job), the thirty-four year old Henry C. Speir had grown accustomed to receiving dubious glances from the white Mississippians to whom it was sometimes necessary to explain his work. Their ordinary bafflement might have turned to derision had they realized that the fifty or hundred dollar bonuses he stood to collect for each of his recorded discoveries were peripheral to his profits from retailing household furniture, victrolas, musical instruments, and records, that his desire to promote blues musicians was a nostalgic survival of childhood evenings spent listening to them sing in his native Sebastopol, and that he was proud of the fact that he (unlike record company executives) never made a nickel at their expense. And sometimes his most diplomatic explanations of his self-made role in recording (he had no official position and was on no company payroll) seemed disingenuous

to others. Irate planters or their stooges who had pronounced him a labor agent had drummed him out of the Delta communities of Tutwiler and Marks; once, in Vicksburg, police had accused him of selling drugs in the guise of scouting, and ordered him out of the city.

Drug-peddling, after all, was a more conventional and only slightly more disreputable pastime than dredging up blues musicians in black neighborhoods; besides Speir, only one man in the state (Ralph Lembo) took it upon himself to actively promote blues singers as recording properties, and he almost never left his native Itta Bena to look for them. The musicians Speir sought out not only in Mississippi but in cities like New Orleans, Memphis (his two best sources of talent), Louisville, St. Louis and even Chicago had no status as legitimate entertainers, but represented the skid row of their profession. Although white customers frequently bought blues records at his store on Farish Street, the day of the venerable plantation minstrel had passed. Had Speir bothered to poll white residents in the vicinity of *Dockery's* as to their favorite black entertainer, he doubtless would have heard W. C. Handy's name invoked far more often than Charlie Patton's; as a mutual acquaintance of the two musicians (Willie Moore) would say: "Handy's more famous 'mongst the folks around; he's more up-to-date." While the appearance of Handy's orchestra at the Bolivar County courthouse in Cleveland two years before Speir's visit to nearby *Dockery's* had drawn such a crowd that spectactors could not get within a hundred yards of the building, Charlie Patton's appearance in the same proximity would likely draw a fine for vagrancy. "...A man that was singin' the blues," Speir once observed, "...he couldn't intermix with the people too much. He didn't have too much education: he was what we call a 'meat barrel type'. Smell a little bit, you see." Sometimes Speir himself was forced to gag in the presence of his unwashed, uncelebrated blues discoveries. His affection for them rarely went beyond their music; he was as wary of musicians (of either race) as he was of record executives (whom he considered unscrupulous) and had the uneasy feeling that working with "talent" (as he called his discoveries, talented or otherwise) could land him in unspecified trouble, either created by the artists themselves, or the law.

It took a considerable amount of persuasion on his part to gain an audience with Charlie Patton on a spring afternoon in 1929 at *Dockery's* plantation. With the end of the cotton planting season fast approaching, field labor was at a premium. If it was true, as the son of the plantation's founder later recalled, that "Saturday night belonged to *them*" (the black tenants), the days of the week belonged to an overseer who was charged to ensure that the $500 advances they had been handed at the beginning of the season were returned in the form of steady labor. While Patton was not among the sharecroppers

who signed on for these advances, he was no doubt living with someone who had, and whenever he played music he was likely to attract the attention of anyone who heard him. Perhaps for that reason Speir was admonished to conduct his dealings with Patton hastily.

He was then directed towards the northern end of the plantation, which extended some fifteen miles beyond its front entrance along a stretch of road between Cleveland and Ruleville, two modest towns claiming 4000 residents between them. The thousands of acres under cultivation within *Dockery's* were parcelled into subplots for tenant families, with each family cabin (or boxcar; some tenants actually lived in abandoned railway cars) spaced forty or sixty acres apart — a scheme originally introduced on Mississippi plantations decades previously to reduce incidents of "immorality" among slaves. The shacks Speir passed en route to Patton's residence housed blacks, Italians, and Mexicans, who had come to the Delta at the turn of the century and afterwards popularized guitars there.[1] Looking at Charlie Patton for the first time, one could only wonder at the ethnic mixture he represented. His complexion was as light ("bright", in black parlance) as a white person's, and the hair he usually wore parted and combed down in front was brown (beginning to turn grey) and straight, what blacks of the time and place always described as "good". His stature, however, was by no means imposing or striking. He was frail and short (perhaps 5'7", if that) and walked with a limp; his open mouth disclosed some missing back teeth.

His manner, Speir noticed, was "kinda forward" for a black Mississippian. When the scout introduced himself, he commented matter-of-factly that he considered himself the equal of any Delta blues singer who had made records, and for that reason had decided to try his own hand at recording. This was an understatement, for Patton was already so sold on his musical superiority and smitten by the status it conveyed that he insisted his black neighbors on *Dockery's* address him as "Mister Patton". Will Dockery's cook Sara Garrett considered him insufferably vain and arrogant: "He just thought he was the biggest and best in makin' music, you know, and thought everybody oughta look on him (according) to *who* he was," she would say, by way of explaining his self-assumed title. "He just stuck on himself."

The letter he had dictated to Speir (but not written, for he was illiterate) was itself a product of exalted self-opinion, for he could not have sensibly expected Speir to take an interest in him, to the extent of paying him a visit. While Charlie Patton was no doubt a household name among Sunflower County's 45,000-odd blacks, and renowned in dozens of black neighorhoods in Mississippi, his name meant nothing at all to H. C. Speir. The latter considered all of the artists he dealt with to be nonentities, the "off-side" (as he put it) of the blues

recording field. None of the musicians he could have associated with the Delta had proven successful in a field where ten thousand sales of a single item was counted as an industry hit.

It would not have occurred to Speir to make any effort to assess Patton's popularity before considering him as a blues recording prospect, and it would not have mattered to him had he supposed Patton an unknown beyond the confines of *Dockery's*. He had never even questioned his own store customers regarding their tastes in blues; he considered them too ignorant to communicate anything of value to him. Quite groundlessly, he believed that his tastes were their tastes. He felt that blues hits were basically determined by the emotiveness of the performer, and considered the Delta a ripe breeding-grounds for commercially appealing bluesmen because its oppressive economic and social conditions gave native musicians "incentive" to release their emotions through song. He, at any rate, was poignantly affected by the Delta bluesmen who had existed, he imagined, "as long as the Delta's been there." His own education in blues (which he took to be an outgrowth of spirituals) had been acquired early in life, practically in his back yard. "...Whenever these Negroes would sing, especially late in the evening," he recalled, "it was a lonesome sound...I *knew* what this Negro singin' was doin': I *knew* it was good." But only recently had record executives (by a process he did not understand) come to share his long-held belief that such "off-side" music was commercially viable—a belief Speir had based not only on his own vulnerability to Mississippi blues but on a cold calculation he had made (even before entering the record business) that Southern tastes lagged five years behind those of a nation that clamored for more sophisticated-sounding music.

Such beliefs translated directly into Speir's scouting decisions. Although he collected the same fee from the sales flop as from the sales success, he would never refer any bluesman who did not impress him as a potential best-seller to a record company, even if he found no fault with the performer's music. He had no idea what standards his employers used to gauge his recommendations, and imagined that they had none at all. But as Charlie Patton retrieved a guitar from his shack and braced himself against a nearby tractor to begin his audition, arbitrary sales theory was far removed from Speir's mind. In practice he was usually unable to determine on the basis of a live audition how any voice would project when it passed through the primitive recording equipment of the era. When he had auditioned Tommy Johnson the previous year near Jackson, for example, he had real misgivings about the latter's ability: "Tommy Johnson, when you'd hear him play or sing, you'd just wonder whether it'd be good or not (on record)...He was just mediocre..." One of Johnson's drawbacks as a performer was a speech defect: "You'd be somewhat distracted

by the way he kinda hissed...you know, like a snake. You'd notice it and it'd detract from his singin'...It was a nervous habit, and you'd just kinda feel (sorry) for him." But when Speir tested Johnson on his own recording equipment he found that the microphone was impervious to this mannerism.

As Patton began tuning his instrument (a Stella, the brand Speir believed produced the best bass tone of any guitar), he remarked that his performance would be improved with the benefit of whiskey, a point some of his fellow musicians might have disputed. When Speir failed to grasp this hint Patton asked if he had some liquor to offer. Speir had none, but the point registered. On future occasions when Speir was to pay his respects to Charlie Patton he would correct his oversight by bringing along enough corn liquor to keep his pet discovery — and the "gang" of fellow musicians Patton always collected to serenade him — in the proper spirit of blues-playing. It took two hours of steady drinking and playing, Speir would observe, before Patton really hit his stride and got what Speir called the "swing" of his music.

The overwhelming impression that Charlie Patton in good spirits (alcoholic or otherwise) could make upon a listener is illustrated by the reminiscence of Booker ("Mr. Pink") Miller, who was to meet him within six months of Speir's visit to *Dockery's* and afterwards become (as David Edwards termed him) Patton's "road buddy".

"I was a guitar-player myself," Miller said, "and I tried to learn everything he played, because I liked it. I *loved* it. In other words, it will carry you: *it'll carry you*...He was the best in *my* book, and it was some real guitar-players had passed through here.[2] He was the champ, and he could sing...

"He had a voice — he had a *voice*! You know what I heard a man tell him one time there in Ruleville, Mississippi? He told him, he said: 'You know, to listen at your records and then come to see you — I thought I'd see a man weighed two hundred and seventy-five pounds! And *you*! You don't weigh one-fifty!'

"Charlie say: 'I weigh a hundred and thirty-five!'"

The booming baritone voice that was so out of keeping with its pipsqueak possessor was one of the first qualities of Patton's performance that registered favorably with Speir as the artist began his audition with his theme song, *Pony Blues*. "When I heard Charlie sing," Speir recalled, "I knew that voice would carry (on record)." While its coarse texture did not seem unusual to Speir ("He had a regular ol' Mississippi River voice, that's all there was to it"), the rhythmic pulse that propelled it struck him as sounding different from anything he had ever heard. Had he not been impressed by Patton's individuality (as either a singer or guitarist) his enthusiasm for him would have waned considerably; as he once explained: "...My workin' way was to try to get one that was

original; (record) what he got up himself." As it so happened, most of the bluesmen he had already heard and was to hear in coming years sounded nearly interchangeable to him: "Tommy Johnson and Charlie Patton," he said, "was the only ones who had a style that was a little bit different."[3]

While the record official to whom Speir was to recommend Patton was primarily concerned with the singing ability of his artists, Speir put equal credence in the guitar work of blues performers he auditioned. On this score he took Patton to be more than exceptional: "Charlie was *good* with that guitar: I mean he could handle a guitar *outta this world*!"[4] While he did not concern himself with the lyrics his discoveries sang, he considered Patton the best blues lyricist he ever encountered, and claimed to have no difficulty understanding his sometimes impenetrable diction.

Speir's only remaining reservation about Patton's suitability as a recording act — the extent of his repertoire — was resolved when Patton played four or five more pieces to complete his audition: "...He really had a lot of songs, and I knew that he was okay." Record companies, Speir had found, preferred artists who could record at least six titles, and those who could produce that number in a single session would earn both Speir and themselves the maximum industry pay-offs for their efforts. In retrospect, Speir would conclude that Patton's compositional facility exceeded that of any blues artist he ever dealt with, including Tommy Johnson, who had developed only two distinctive songs when Speir first auditioned him. "Most singers had only one or two songs," Speir recalled. "Lots of singers could sing other people's songs but not make up their own." The variety of Patton's repertoire impressed him no less than its extensiveness: "I'll tell you about Charlie: he just had a *method* — he could play a guitar different on anything he'd sing. A lotta fellas would do the same song (i.e., accompaniment) over and over: not Charlie."

One imagines that Patton, no matter how gratified by Speir's enthusiastic reception of his music, took a cautious view of the latter's recording proposals, for he had already been approached by Ralph Lembo of Itta Bena with a recording offer, and the session in question had fallen through, apparently because of Patton's misgivings. At any rate, he was not outwardly pleased by his audition performance: "He told me he'd be better if he'd a had the whiskey,"[4] Speir said. Had he lived to discuss his recordings he might have made the same comment concerning them, for the man who supervised his first sessions, Arthur Laibly, denied that his artists were allowed to drink on the job: "They didn't get a drop while they were recording. You couldn't take a chance. I would give it to them *after* they were done with the recording."[5]

It was probably a matter of weeks after Patton's discovery that he made his debut for Paramount Records on June 14, 1929. For nearly a year he would

loom as one of the most coveted stars of the blues recording field while remaining, as the Memphis record salesman Earl Montgomery put it, "more Speir's nigger than anyone else's." Then thirty years would elapse before his recordings — first retailed to black audiences — would earn him posthumous acclaim as a blues great. But the white collectors who first discovered Patton's records in the mid-1940s and gradually succeeded in bringing his work to a wider public were by no means the first of their race to recognize his talent. One of his contemporary white enthusiasts was Montgomery, who supplied Mississippi retailers with Paramount records, and saw Patton play in the town of Skene while making his rounds. In 1970 he said of Patton: "That sonofabitch was *good.*" Before his death in 1972, H. C. Speir went even further, declaring: "He beat 'em all." How completely he became Patton's white man is seen by the fact that whereas he had only perfunctory contact with most of his "talent", he liked nothing better than to entrust his store to an assistant on Thursday or Friday afternoons and make his way up to *Dockery's*, a journey that took over three hours. "I used to go up there and spend half a night, nearly, and then come home," he said. "I'd go up there to see Charlie...Now you're talkin' about havin' fun and really enjoyin' a trip — that would be it!"

The singular esteem that Speir and Booker Miller had for Charlie Patton's music was not unfounded, for the recordings he made as a result of Speir's trip to *Dockery's* establish him as a singular musician: a blues singer who transcended the blues genre. "It's unfair to label him a Mississippi bluesman," says Woody Mann, a sophisticated jazz guitarist who has studied his music. "He's like another breed. He's more interesting, more lively, and more complex than any Mississippi bluesman. He's not just someone with a couple of good tunes, or a little bag of clever musical tricks. There's real elegance in his music. He's a real original. He couldn't have basically copied anyone: his music has too much variety, and too few patterns. You just don't see his kind of spontaneity in an imitative musician. He may have been a blues guitarist in name, but in spirit he was a jazz artist."

Yet the reminiscences of most of Patton's blues-playing contemporaries give no hint of his remarkability, let alone greatness. It is a devastating comment on their acuity (or integrity) that none of them (with the exception of Booker Miller) ever suggested to a researcher that there was anything extraordinary about his music.

Mississippi bluesmen who had none of his gifts were apt to speak condescendingly of him, as though he were a second-rater with a first-rate ability to fool the public. Ishmon Bracey of Jackson, who could not even tune a guitar properly, lumped Patton with the monotonous recording stars of the era in a 1963 interview with John Fahey: "...In those recordin' (days)...they

mostly...keep their style of music, more so than they do now...Now in this commercial time of recordin', they (the record officials) wants different (i.e., varied) tunes, but see people...didn't know as much as they do now about those sorts of things...They just had one tune...If his voice would change you'd know him by his music 'cause he kept that same tune...Blind Lemon, Blind Blake—they had one tune; ol' Charlie Patton had one tune..."[6] Yet Bracey himself was more repetitive than any of the artists he misrepresented as one-tune musicians, and he would have been even more limited had he not heeded Arthur Laibly's suggestion that it "it was a good idea" (as Bracey put it) to vary his studio accompaniments. Bracey's talents did not equal his ambitions, which were so formidable that he paid Speir a dozen visits after his discovery in an effort to sell himself as a recording property.

The blues singers who criticized Patton were likewise largely attesting to their relative insignificance as live and recording attractions, and their resentment of his popularity. The show-off stunts with which Patton frequently embellished his performances made him a target of lesser musicians' brickbats. "He wasn't all that much a player," said Willie Morris, an untalented Bolton bluesman who saw Patton in such towns as Itta Bena, Moorhead, and Tutwiler. "He was a *jiver.*" On the basis of Patton's "clowning" (showing off), Son House discounted his music altogether: "He wasn't no musicianer...'cause he clowned too much," House insisted. "...You see, blues ain't for no clownin'— lotta guys don't know that, see? Blues ain't for no clownin', man! It's sincere, just like a Christian song...That clownin' part spoil out the blues part, 'cause blues is a sincere, heart-searchin' thing—you really mean what you doin', from the heart...not no 'monkey-junk'." In this glib fashion, House was able to beg the question of Patton's abilities and quarantine him as a musical pretender whose music did not even warrant consideration as blues.

Yet House never asked Patton what meaning blues or his own songs actually held for him. His own understanding of blues was hardly authoritative, for he took up blues-singing a scant three years before Patton's discovery, by which time Patton had already been playing for some two decades. The transformation of blues from the good-time music Patton generally treated it as to the dour song of House's interpretation seems to have been fostered by Tin Pan Alley songwriters whose effusions were widely recorded by theatre blues singers of the early 1920s. As late as 1919 W. C. Handy was to state: "The sorrow songs of the slaves we call Jubilee Melodies. The happy-go-lucky songs of the Southern negro we call blues."[7]

For its own audience, Mississippi blues functioned purely as party and dance music, and it was to this end that Patton tailored his performing style. "...Now when it go to One- Steppin', Two-Steppin', Charleston, Lindberg (i.e.,

the Lindberg Hop), stuff like that," Booker Miller said, "now that was the kinda stuff he liked. You see, that kinda stuff was what these fellas call on TV 'action' you know; that's where the 'action' was in those days."

Just as the blues dancer created lively "action" through physical gyrations, so did Patton provide comparable excitement with acrobatic guitar stunts of every description. "What he loved to do was 'clown' with his guitar, just puttin' it all under his legs and back behind him," Sam Chatmon recalled, "takin' his hand and puttin' it all back his head[8]...See, that was doin' the folks more good than just straight playin'...He couldn't do that on a record. Now if they'd a-had picture shows like they got now—he'd a-made him a couple reels, it a-went over *big*."

Ultimately it was not for the sake of spectactle that Patton resorted to these antics. "He said it helps him, it rests him a lot," Booker Miller explained. The length of Patton's performances and the tremendous energy and effort he invested in his most popular themes no doubt mandated such interludes, which would have served to husband his voice. Apparently Patton was adroit enough at pacing himself that others did not see his "clowning" for what it was, most likely because it complemented his flamboyant personality. Nathan (Dick) Bankston, who met him in 1910, knew the young Patton not only as a colorful musician but as a "clown from his heart" as well. He remained so when Frank Howard became his neighbor a decade afterwards, retaining this impression of his guitar-playing: "He'd cut monkey-shines with it: put it 'round his head, then change hands with it, play off with his feet and all that kinda stuff..." Son House remembered that he had a trick of playing "pitty pat" with his hat as he played guitar, alternating hands in a rhythmic motion to knock it from one side of his head to the other. "He's just a clownin' guy, that jerk is," House said. "He's good at it, though!"

House insisted that "clowning" accompanied "near about every one" of the pieces Patton played when they met around 1930. In working as a soloist at dances, Patton could not have "clowned" extensively without fatally disrupting the "action" he had been hired to generate. Moreover, had he relied on "clowning" to the extent House claimed, he could scarcely have exhibited the finesse as a straightforward player he displayed on his recordings. In all likelihood House merely paid scant attention to his serious music.[9] In attributing Patton's popularity solely to his show-off antics, House seemed to betray a sneaking resentment of Patton's success. Any number of less renowned musicians than Patton had a retinue of guitar stunts, and these had no apparent effect on their reputations. While Patton's records presented no visual dimension and bore no hint of "clowning", they nevertheless sold "like popcorn" in Mississippi, as his admirer Booker White put it. If anything, he became a blues celebrity despite

his "clowning", which caused some listeners to disparage him in the fashion of Skene's Bunk Ashford, who complained that "Charlie carried on too much foolishness." If any listeners valued him over other blues performers simply because of his guitar tricks, they are unknown to posterity.

Though Patton's guitar stunts made a mixed impression on his audience, the fact that he was a more vibrant performer than a musician like House played no small part in kindling his celebrity. To Robinsonville's Elizabeth Moore, Patton's musical abilities appeared no greater than those of her neighbor House. Yet she preferred to watch Patton because "he just had a way of *actin'*..." Her husband Willie, who played with both musicians, added: "He had a way of 'comin' to the people', you see, would just draw your attention." Patton's records have the same dynamic quality, which is altogether missing from other recorded Mississippi blues.

Patton's uncanny liveliness as a performer gave his music an intangible and inimitable dimension that elevated it above house "frolic" entertainment and probably made him the singular attraction he was. "Oh man, he puts *all* his-self into it," Booker Miller said of his performing style. "...Sometimes it looks just like he's gonna fall outta his chair."

It is clear from his recordings that Patton was able to achieve his intensity because he had complete and seemingly effortless command of his material. His intensity is infectious because it is never taut, but buoyant. Such is not true of other bluesmen who have powerful deliveries, which were a necessary aspect of dance-oriented entertainment. Without exception Patton's recorded contemporaries sound labored by comparison, and it would have been difficult for Patton's public to have remained immune to this distinction, even if they were not conscious of it.

One of the most significant differences between the tenor of Patton's performances and that of other Mississippi bluesmen lies in Patton's unpredictable attack. No other Mississippi bluesman took his approach of manipulating his level of intensity during a song. The vocal and instrumental attack of the Mississippi bluesman was a scripted affair, set forth in the opening stanza and simply recapitulated in subsequent ones.

In general Patton was known for his forcefulness. "We just played 'hard' blues, that's what we played," Booker Miller recalled. He added to the vehemence of his playing and singing by using his feet as percussion instruments. "He'd stomp his feet, you know—his feet '*talk*'," Willie Moore said. "...I loved to hear him pat his foot and sing—he *sure* could pat his foot. He'd stomp his foot; keep up a lotta racket, but man, he *sure* carried on! Tickled *me*..."

Patton sometimes did sedentary dance steps as he played: "look like he's dancin' on his foot," Johnnie Mack observed. When he "stomped" he did so

with the full weight of his legs, pounding the floor with his heels. To add to the impact of this sound, Booker Miller recalled, he attached metal cleats to the heels of his shoes. His "stomping" (which is audible on such records as *Down The Dirt Road* and *High Water Everywhere*) made so much noise that employers at house "frolics" he serenaded in Renova between 1910-1915 planted pillows beneath his feet through fear that he would otherwise awaken neighbors.[10] To Richard (Hacksaw) Harney, Patton's ferocious foot-tapping would "sound like it's five or six people in there stompin'...Folks like it: *racket's* all *they* want!"

From the standpoint of Harney, who worked in a Cincinnati jazz band in the early Twenties and had a strictly instrumental guitar repertoire, Patton's music was barbaric. He reduced Patton's art to "just playin' on the strings and clownin'" and insisted: "...Patton couldn't play!...Shit, no!...He couldn't make no (full) chords or nothin'; he couldn't play no chords on no guitar...All he had: the mouth and the stompin'." Harney's contempt for Patton's music was no doubt incited by Patton's enormous prestige seen from the jealous vantage point of a nonentity, for it was only in terms of chord vocabulary that Harney compared favorably to him. It was the high-faluted Harney rather than the "primitive" Patton who tuned imperfectly on recordings.

As a blues dance guitarist who accompanied his own singing, Patton had no incentive to develop great prowess with chords. His black audiences would not have stood for the pop material that went beyond the one, two, or three chord blues accompaniment, for such music was not geared to their dances. Though Son House relished the World War One show tune *Goodbye Broadway, Hello France* (which he had sung with fellow draftees while embarking from New York to France in the waning weeks of World War One), his Delta patrons did not. "They didn't want that," House said. "You had to play the real old flat-foot blues...They didn't wanna hear nothin' like *that*—no, man!"

Harney once bested Eugene Powell in a guitar contest near Hollandale in 1927 because he proved able to accompany all of Powell's pieces, while Powell could not follow all of his own. A similar contest with Patton would have ended in a draw, for Patton not only used unconventional phrasing and accenting patterns, but (as Booker Miller pointed out) "always 'moved out' on the guitar" when he played for dances. The torturous One Step and Slow Drag tempos that were the metier of such Mississippi bluesmen as Tommy Johnson, Willie Brown, Rube Lacy and Kid Bailey held little appeal to him. He specialized in playing fast Two Step and Shimmy-She-Wobble music, and his ability to combine speed and intricacy made it impossible for Harney's associate Johnnie Mack (who favored Harney's music over Patton's because it involved "more different chords, fancy chords, pretty chords...") to accompany when the pair met in Longswitch.

Like Harney, Mack considered Patton's "mouth" his only real asset. "...He could whoop and holler and sing and so on," Mack said, "that's what made him known...Lord God, he could holler. He beat *everybody* hollerin'...And the people went after him; they like to have a fit." Significantly, the only nickname any of Patton's interviewed acquaintances found fit to bestow on him was "Old Wide Mouth," as Ledell Johnson called him.

"Charlie Patton, he had a voice one while," David Edwards says. "I'm tellin' you: he didn't need no mike. He just stand up with that gross-staggerin' voice he had: he just done somethin' for the people. He broke them country houses *down.*" Without his tremendous volume as a singer, Patton could not have become a successful blues careerist, for no acoustic guitar could project well enough to provide a dance beat for a noisy audience of the type that was likely to patronize a barrelhouse or house "frolic".

While the gritty quality of Patton's baritone did not seem remarkable to H. C. Speir, it no doubt impressed his audience. Mandy Whigam, who heard Patton perform on the streets of Inverness and her native Swiftown, deemed the voices of his associates Willie Brown and Son House artificial by comparison: "They rattle off...singin' 'greasy neck', I call it: just like they got grease in their throat...Charlie's voice came *outta* his throat...Little Willie (Brown), he *tries* to come outta his throat, but he really just can't...Charlie didn't have to push; his is just natural." Yet Patton's raucous vocal sound was in itself mannered, for he dispensed with it in such songs as *Shake It And Break It* and *Runnin' Wild,* which were delivered in an easy crooning fashion.

In every discernable respect, Patton's was a refined rather than a raw talent, and the only sensible explanation of the fact that he became Mississippi's most famous blues musician and the Delta's dominant musical force in his lifetime is that he had no musical match. The worst judges of his music were rival musicians who craved the recognition others rightly bestowed on him. It was thanks to his success that he was not only widely disparaged, but widely copied. "I don't care who liked it and who didn't," Eugene Powell said of Patton's music, "he *had* that country down there...He had that country in his style of playing." Booker Miller felt that Patton had no successful imitators: "Charlie had a style that many guys wanted but couldn't get up to it."

David Edwards (whose musical acquaintances included Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, and Skip James) said: "The really best break-down country blues player...that I really knowed, that drawed the largest crowd, was Charlie Patton. He was mostly the leadingest man down through there."

Johnnie Mack, who met Patton around 1930, recalled: "When you first come in around where he was, everybody went: 'Charlie Patton!' And you couldn't get around in the house for *nothin'*. 'Charlie Patton!' A man had him

to play down there at Longswitch, had him sittin' up on a (store) counter...one night when I first come in: if it wasn't five hundred people, it wasn't one."

"When Charlie Patton's gonna be somewhere," Booker Miller said, "you come there: you'll find the folks. They natural-born *loved* him."

He was so popular, Miller recalled, as to often intimidate the petty entrepreneurs who organized house "frolics" on various Delta plantations: "You just couldn't get a man like Charlie Patton just anywhere...You'd a-had plenty people (who could) raise enough money to pay him, but people was just scared to do it."

Willie Moore, who met Patton sometime before 1919, knew him as a musician who did not play in small towns or on plantations. "You never could get Charlie Patton to play in little 'short' places, 'cause wouldn't be no natives to dance—the *men* wouldn't 'low it. We'd be playin' someplace, man; them men'd get them women, carry 'em away from there!...'Cause Charlie Patton, he would...start to talkin' them blues and them women'd start to popping their fingers and skippin', man: them niggers turn, say: 'Let's get away from here!'

"...When he hit that guitar them womens would start to clownin', and that made the mens didn't like Charlie Patton...They'd have to hold them, fling the girls back: 'Get back, honey!' Them niggers don't like it; they go fightin' about every dance we played for...'Cause you know how them womens go: 'Hey, hey!' 'Child, play it till I get somewhere!'...'Hey, hey, child, just play it till I see somebody I ain't seen in years!'...You couldn't play for them women; sure couldn't."

David Edwards, who knew Patton when the Depression had pinched his musical markets, likewise recalls the hostility his popularity aroused at dances: "...He had a-lots of womens, you know, and the men'd stand around and look at him and get mad about them old womens."

Patton's contemporaries in the blues field were also vexed by his celebrity: "All the musicians was scared of him," Willie Morris noted. Yet Patton relished the challenge of facing bold competition. As Booker Miller reported: "You know, some (blues musicians) you run in on be 'scarey': you put a hot blues in there, they give up. But some guys just natural-born have the nerve: they wanna go head-on and play. And those was the kind we'se wantin' to meet up with."

If he was cocky about his ability, Patton was more generous towards the music of his contemporaries than they typically were towards his own. "He wasn't a critic," Miller said. "Charlie was very interested in music...and he seemed to enjoy (other people's) music. I never heard him criticize nobody."

If he was autocratic towards the tenants of *Dockery's* and imagined that they should address him deferentially, he did not snub the nobodies of his profession. "Charlie was a big shot," declared Miller, "but he'd always come back home and get with *us*." This willingness to fraternize with lesser-rans

was not characteristic of the recording artists Willie Morris met, who tended to consider themselves as part of an elite whether or not they produced a hit record. "All these musicians used to come to Memphis," Morris said. "...Every *one* of 'em what come up North and made records...Some of them was so 'hankty' (stuck up) they wouldn't make theirselves known to you..."

By contrast, Patton virtually imposed himself on other musicians, as when he heard talk of Eugene Powell during a visit to Tribbet in the late 1920s: "He heard that I could play good and he wanted to hear me play," Powell recalled. "...He sent for me, and when I made up my mind to see what he want I went out there to the place he play at...I went out there Sunday evenin' and he left that mornin'..."

Within a musical culture of unfriendly rivalry that Skip James likened to "a barrel of crabs" Patton was astonishingly helpful to other musicians. On the very day Speir first auditioned him, he told the scout that he knew five or six other bluesmen who would be worth recording. He was continually introducing Speir to other musicians, and as a direct result of his recommendations (for which he was promised no payment) at least six other acts came to record. He gave freely of pointers to novices like Miller, who reported: "He'd keep teachin' me and then he get maybe eight, six new pieces, and he'd disappear. And man, in every music store in town, man, you wouldn't hear nothin' whoopin' but Charlie Patton! Then finally he'd come back."

Before the 1930s Patton ranked as Missisippi's only real blues celebrity, and his reputation was all the more impressive to others because his background seemed unlikely. "You take Charlie, he was a plantation man, but he just got famous," Mandy Whigham said. To her Patton sounded like the proverbial "plantation man", as some blues singers did not. From the recordings of Sam Collins (a singer with a clear tenor and relatively smooth diction) she visualized "one of them cornfield men. He raise hogs and corn; he probably had a bunch of kids...He lived on a plantation, but he wouldn't be what you'd call 'Mister Nettlelow's man'. He's not *way back* (in the country): he's not a *way back* man...He's got a little more pride...He's a better-class nigger; colored person...You can tell from his singin' and music he was country, but I mean he didn't have the country all *in* him—not all the way."

In Patton's records she apprehended "a plantation man...Can't you tell from his singin'?...He come *way back there* on 'Mister Nettlelow'—that's just an expression, that means way back on somebody's plantation...it just means he's way back from the country."

Though Patton's intonation betrayed his plantation origins, his music bore the unmistakable trappings of someone who had stepped out of the hermetic world of the house "frolic" early in his career, either as a carnival or medicine

show trouper, or as a town and city barrelhouse entertainer. His mere ability to tune his guitar properly remained exceptional among Mississippi musicians of the 1920s, and this was not a skill he had likely acquired on a provincial plantation. His technique of making his guitar notes sound more vibrant and penetrating by tuning above concert pitch was employed by only one other blues guitarist, Lonnie Johnson of St. Louis, the most sophisticated blues musician of his era. Patton's instrumental phrasing had the slapdash quality of the street singer's and was basically alien to the Mississippi blues idiom of his time, as purveyed by such "frolic"-oriented entertainers as William Harris, Rube Lacy, Tommy Johnson, Willie Brown, Memphis Minnie, and Booker White, all of whom played in fixed patterns that were probably the legacy of square dance music and instrumental "breakdowns" that had been popular plantation fare at the beginning of the twentieth century. His accompaniments used mixed textures that removed them from the one-dimensional realm of house "frolic" music. The unique product Patton evolved was basically a souped-up version of dance blues, seemingly crafted with one eye fixed on the riff-oriented street player who was basic to the city and another eye cocked on the strum-oriented dance entertainer who was basic to the plantation. It was largely for this reason that Patton's "style" was inaccessible to his peers, for none of them played with his dual frame of reference.

At some point in his early days as a musician he must have gained a broader musical perspective than that of "Mister Nettlelow's man". In his own songs he presented himself as a wanderer who was no stranger to the city, the town, and remote regions he had probably never seen:

> I feel like choppin', chips flyin' everywhere
> I been to the Nation, oh Lord but I couldn't stay there.
>
> Some people tell me: "Oversea blues ain't bad"
> —What was a-matter with 'em?
> It must not a-been them oversea blues I had.
>
> (*Down The Dirt Road Blues*)

The "Nation" was the Choctaw Nation or Chickasaw Nation, divisions of Indian Territory in the southern part of what became Oklahoma in 1907, and Patton may have been too provincial to know that the region no longer existed when he recorded in 1929. However, he knew the value of presenting himself as a much- traveled man of the world to his plantation peers, and the small town of the Delta was for him a nondescript place:

Well they tell me the water, done took "short little town"

—Boy I'm goin' to Vicksburg!

(*High Water Everywhere: Part One*)

He sang of Vicksburg, Jackson, Natchez, Clarksdale, Helena, Memphis, Chicago, and St. Louis, giving scant attention to what Willie Moore would have termed "little short places". Though he played for plantation "frolics", he was not beholden to them. Joe Callicott saw him en route to Memphis around 1929 and recalled: "He come up around Hernando. He didn't tarry: come *through* here. That guy—this town's too small for him! Wasn't nothin' in it for him!"

So great was the sensation created by Patton's records and music in the Mississippi Delta that some of his neighbors could not even envision him as a product of their own soil. Richard Harney said: "...He stayed out here on these plantations, I'm tellin' you: folks have been places out there...and he wouldn't be stayin' *ten miles* from there out on the place, and they'd think he's from somewhere North, and he's just *stayin'* out on these plantations."

"I first thought he was a Northern man," laughed Willie (Have Mercy) Young, who met Patton in Merigold shortly after his *Pony Blues* hit the market in 1929. "I thought he was from New York!"

Having actually met Patton, a contemporary was likely to be confounded by him, for his personality was as curious as his approach to music, as might be expected of someone who swam against the musical currents of his time.

Portrait Of The Artist As A Well-Meaning Woofer

"Charlie was a hell of a fella; Charlie was somethin' else."—David Edwards

Summing up Charlie Patton's activities over the course of their three year relationship as fellow tenants of a small plantation, Frank Howard said: "I never knowed him to do nothin' but pick that guitar and crack jokes." One of the clues to Patton's success as an entertainer lies in his complete absorption in music-making and its basic fringe benefits (women and whiskey). "...He just believed in playin' his guitar, havin' a big time with his women, and drinkin' his whiskey," Booker Miller said of him. He had no other known diversions except for fishing, and when he visited the barrelhouses and house "frolics" that were his basic source of income he did not, Miller reported, gamble or dance there.

At the same time, Patton was more than a mere blues careerist, entertaining others simply to collect the spoils of his profession. He was virtually unique in making his music a genuine medium of self-expression. Few blues performers conveyed any sense of themselves as individuals through their music. Patton's songs bore the imprint of a histrionic personality that was baffling to his peers. "If people just didn't understand him," Booker Miller recalled, "they'd say he was a 'funny' (peculiar) person." Son House found him peculiar to the point of incomprehensibility: "He had *somethin'* in him. I don't know what it was."

Patton's peculiarities became his basic performing ingredients. Within a single song he would project the contradictory image of the flippant cut-up and the "hard" blues singer whose playing and singing bore a suggestion of truculence. His singing style caused Sam Chatmon to shudder: "He just bring his voice out so *nasty,*" Chatmon said, "he could hold it so long, it sound *nasty.*" Yet while singing in this fashion in a work like *Down The Dirt Road* and pummeling his guitar as though striking a person (a comparison Patton himself made) he would make quips that brought an incongruous element of farce to the performance.

Patton's contradictions as a performer gave his material real character. Intentionally or otherwise, it added depth to songs of no intrinisic subtlety. Just as his unexpected flippancy added a light, zany dimension to "hard" blues, so did his boisterousness provide a forceful, "lowdown" dimension to fluffy material like *Shake It And Break It.*

The contrasting ingredients Patton injected in his material were elements of his own ambiguous personality. Offstage, he impressed Son House as an uncontrollably carefree, happy-go-lucky man who (when he was not liquor-laden) could hardly complete a sentence without breaking into a guffaw. "...He didn't worry about *nothin'*," House said of him. Yet Patton's lighter side was a facade or separate dimension of a self in turmoil. Asleep, House remembers, he would "fuss all night", tossing and bellowing continually. His waking moments were often no more tranquil. "Patton was kinda...you know what I mean; he was evil-tempered," Hayes McMullen said hesitantly of him. "...He'd try to boss you around. He was a 'racket' man..." Willie Moore agreed: "He wouldn't talk to a man right."

The verbal venom that often dismayed or rankled Patton's acquaintances usually poured forth, House observed, when he was so drunk that "he wouldn't even hardly know he'd done anything." In his reflective moments, House felt, he regretted his outbursts and the poor impression they created: "I believe he had enough sense to think about that." He was not deliberately antagonistic towards others, at least when sober. If his antics offended anyone, Frank Howard noted, "...he'd beg your pardon: tell you he didn't mean any harm whatsoever. He was not a 'imposin' person." When Patton genuinely liked someone (which may have been seldom) he made himself a warm, pleasant companion. Booker Miller, a much younger musician whom Patton took upon himself to tutor, was captivated by his personality. "He wasn't on the mean side none, but if you didn't understand him, you'd think he was," said Miller, who did not hesitate to pronounce Patton "a very nice fella".

One of Patton's mannerisms that might have been mistakenly interpreted as a sign of meanness was a stand-offish habit of addressing acquaintances by impersonal nouns like "kid," "fella," or "nigger". By turn, he never bore any of the familiar nicknames by which bluesmen were frequently known.[1] "Everybody called him 'Patton'," Miller remembered. "They didn't call him 'Charlie Patton', they called him 'Patton', his friends 'round Ruleville...The rest of 'em, they'd say 'Charlie Patton' straight out." From this and his haughty desire to be addressed as "Mister Patton" (which was apparently not respected beyond *Dockery's* plantation, if there) it follows that Patton found little kinship with his peers. His nephew Tom Cannon, who grew up on *Dockery's* (and still lived there, at age seventy, as of 1981), was able to recall but a single close friend of Patton's, a farmer on the same plantation named Marshall Turner. Even Booker Miller, to whom Patton presented a photograph of himself as a keepsake[2], never visited him at home or received a visit from Patton, who kept in touch with him by mail.

Yet there is no doubt that Patton enjoyed the company of a crowd, at least when it marched to the beat of his own drum. The steady stream of banter he kept up on the dance floor indicates his easy rapport with his audience. "Oh man, he do all that kinda talkin', you know, when people be out on the floor dancin'," Miller said. "He'd be singin' along, an' he'd tell them what to do and all that kinda thing. You've seen people call sets, haven't you? He put it on just like that. Just like you was a good dancer, he'd just as soon call your name; he'd tell you: 'Stop right there and do so-and-so!'"

The remarkable extent to which spontaneous impulses governed Patton's performances (and probably, most of his behavior) is illustrated by his inexplicable habit of subjecting barrelhousers to sudden interludes of church music. "Right there in the middle of a dance," Miller recalled, "it didn't make him no difference: if it hit him, he just go to playin' church songs right there. They'd just back up in a corner and listen, 'cause they couldn't turn him down." With these flights of religious fancy Patton became a true heretic in a Fundamentalist society that took blues-playing and religious feeling to represent irreconcilable opposites.

Outside the barrelhouse Patton liked to impress others with his piety. When he met Howard he described himself as a former church deacon; later he updated (and upgraded) his ecclesiastical status. "He always said he was a preacher," Miller reported.

Patton's reasons for talking up this real or invented church affiliation (apparently involving the Baptist church, which counted deacons among their officialdom) are curious. In his time and place religion was perceived as a matter of deeds, not words or roles, and neither piety nor church position per se were likely to impress Patton's peers, who knew that Baptists were forbidden to drink, let alone play dance music. Frank Howard found Patton so lacking in solemnity, sobriety, and conscience that he considered him Satan incarnate: "He was a 'devil-*right*'. Was his horn and tail: that's all he lacked for bein' the devil himself."

None of Patton's known associates ever saw him behind a pulpit (few attended church), although Willie Morris cynically supposed that he could have succeeded there because "Charlie Patton had a whole lotta mouth, and it takes a big-mouthed man to be a preacher." Son House, on the other hand, considered Patton too disreputable to have posed successfully as a preacher: "He couldn'ta (preached) if he'd *a-wanted* to: they wouldn't 'low him *near* a pulpit, nowhere."[3]

Apparently Patton appreciated the bankruptcy of his religious pretensions, even as he maintained them. "We'd go to talkin' about preachin'," Booker Miller recalled. "I'd say to him: 'Oh hell, man! You know God ain't gonna have nothin' like us!' Ha! It would tickle him to death!"

While Patton made an unlikely deacon or church convert under any circumstances, his earnesty on the subject of religion was sufficient to prompt him to pillor a hell-raising cleric on *Elder Greene Blues*:

> I love to fuss an' fight
> Lord an' get sloppy drunk offa *Bottle an' Bond*
> An' walk the streets all night.

Patton's song advanced a jaundiced Baptist view of the Church of God in Christ, whose preachers were known as "elders" and whose claims that converts were immune from sin led to their disparagement as "sancts". Put-downs of the Holiness Church (as it was also known) and its doctrine of sanctification (which held that the Holy Spirit eradicated all sin among believers) held special appeal for backsliding Baptists who considered themselves tarnished by sin, and Patton would seem to have belonged to this company. The underlying message of *Elder Greene* was that his own favored church excluded n'er-do-wells like Elder Greene (or himself), and that "sanctification" was simply license.[4]

In true Baptist fashion, Patton would seem to have considered himself a deviate of the flesh, but pure of spirit. On the spiritual *Prayer Of Death* he left a smattering of religious autobiography:

> Ever since my mother been dead
> Trouble been rollin' all over my head.

The implication of this verse was that his mother was a church-goer who had once exerted a restraining influence on him, as in Charley Jordan's depiction of the "hellbound boy":

> Let me tell you boys, don't you have no hard, hard head
> If you do you will be hellbound,
> just as soon as your mother is dead.
> (*Hellbound Boy*: 1932)

In *Screamin' And Hollerin'*, Patton borrowed the concluding couplet of Alberta Hunter's *Down South Blues* (1923), which took a similarly childish view of maternal guidance:

> If I had listened to my dear old mother
> I'd be...in my happy home.

But instead I had a hard hard head
So I started out to roam...

When I get back my folks will meet me with
outstretched arms
My mother an' father are there to protect me
to keep me from all harm.

My mother's gettin' old an' her hair is turnin' grey
And it would break her heart to see me livin'
this a-way.

Patton's song likewise presents himself as an unhappy drifter:

Jackson on a high hill mama, Natchez just below
I ever get back home I, won't be back no more.

'Cause my mother's gettin' old, her head is turnin'
grey
Don't you know it'll break her heart know,
my livin' this a-way.

Though Patton was given to pious postures, he was precisely the sort of person Fundamentalist preachers fulminated against. His dance floor religious rhapsodies were those of a histrionic person who would loudly scratch any manner of itch. As Sam Chatmon described him: "He always had his feelings sorta on top of his clothes." It was this quality that made Patton a great performer, but a human volcano who would erupt furiously if someone in a barrelhouse violated his own sense of decorum.

Willie Moore recalled: "I'll tell you this one thing: if Charlie Patton was sittin' down where women (were) in there, and you know some fellas get drunk and...go to 'blackguardin" (cursing) where women were around, that fella would get up with a chair or somethin' and try to knock your brains out. He didn't 'low it. And 'playin' the dozens'. Have mercy! He's against *that.*"

Patton projected his aversion to cursing in his depiction of *Frankie And Albert.* Before killing her philandering boyfriend, Frankie complains:

Say: "You remember on last Sunday
Twenty-fifth day of May
You 'buked me an' you cursed me,

Oh baby, all that day.'
Hey he was my man, but he done me wrong."

"...He didn't use nasty language," said Booker Miller, who regarded Patton as a basically wholesome character devoted to "playin' guitar, havin' a good time..." Frank Howard, who took the opposite view of Patton, recalled his antipathy to the joking, belligerent sexual allusions to one's mother known as "the dozens": "Anytime you get to talkin' some kinda old 'bad' talk and bring his mother in on it, you can look for it (i.e., trouble)...I never heard him say nothin' about nobody's mother; nothin' 'bad', you know."

Although Son House's recollection that Patton "cussed a *whole* lot" at most applied to his behavior around males, his memory of Patton as a high-handed person was well-founded. "He wanted everything to go the way he wanted it to go," House said. In this respect and in his combative way of expressing disgruntlement Patton invited comparison to the roustabouts who once populated Delta levee and road camps and were known for a rough, kidding style of repartee called "checkin'." Many of these laborers were far more boisterous and menacing than Charlie Patton. Describing his co-workers at a Ruleville road camp during the First World War, Skip James said: "Those guys on those camps, would even get to squabblin' and fightin' at the dinner table...The guys at the table wouldn't say: 'Pass me such and such a thing' if they wanted a big pan of meat or biscuits, or rice and stuff like that. They said: 'Let such-and-such a thing *walk* up that motherfuckin' table.' If you didn't just pass it right on to him, he'd jump on that table and walk the table to get it. Right over the plates and everything."

Even as a genteel variation of the belligerent roustabout, Patton was ultimately a throwback to the Southern frontier society Cash depicted accordingly:

> ...the individualism of the plantation world would be one which, like the backcountry before it, would be far too much concerned with bald, immediate, unsupported assertion of the ego, which placed too great stress on the inviolability of personal whim, and which was full of the chip-on-the shoulder swagger and brag of a boy — one in brief, of which the essence was the boast, voiced or not, on the part of every Southerner, that he would knock hell out of whoever dared to cross him.[5]

For Patton, too, arguing was a way of life. "He'd scrap in a minute," recalls Hayes McMullen, who once saw Patton smash his guitar over a woman's head

and never passed a single evening in his company without witnessing a verbal clash between him and another barrelhouser.

Were such tempestuousness the extent of Patton's social style he would have been readily recognizable as a then-contemporary black stereotype, described by such slang expressions as "tush hog" or "wampus cat". But Patton was a tease as well as a "tush hog", as the levity of his songs would lead one to suspect. "He could 'play' with you just as good as he could look at you solid," Booker Miller said. Everyone he met was subjected to a kind of friendly hazing, Frank Howard reported: "He'd grin at 'im, carry on a lot of foolishness...If he found out you could 'stand' foolishness, he'd carry it on with you."

Often his tomfoolery took the form of barbed quips about a person's appearance. "He'd mostly joke people about their clothes," Howard said. "Tell 'em they are a 'pretty tough-lookin' fellow: don't know whether Death gonna come by Himself or bring a gun when He come at him, he so 'bad-lookin", and all such as junk like that."

Patton's own clothing was nondescript, though he could have afforded to dress in the stylish fashion of the gamblers and pimps whose wardrobes were imitated by blues singers like Skip James. "...He dressed like a plough-hand," Son House recalled. When House knew him (in 1930) his everyday dress was a pair of farmer's overalls: "He'd put on his other old clothes, pants and things, to go to the ball." He was fond of hats and sometimes wore a white cap in the 1920s, but the hat he owned when House associated with him was a battered production that protested the dictates of fashion and sanitation: "He'd buy a hat like this year an' he wouldn't buy another one till two years from now...He wouldn't care how greasy it got or whatnot." It was probably the remnants of the same hat, crumpled and torn around the brim, that created a humorous impression when Elizabeth Moore saw him in Robinsonville. His only other recounted affectation was a scarf he wrapped around his neck on the occasions Hayes McMullen saw him perform. Besides his guitar, the only article of commerce Patton is known to have owned was a billfold that impressed Booker Miller as "nice-lookin'", and Patton was jealous of its contents. "Now I'd get paid, and he'd get paid," Son House reported. "I'd spend mine, but he wouldn't spend his." Since his wants were few, and often catered to by his employers, the trajectory of his considerable recording and performing income remains unaccountable.

According to Frank Howard, Patton's repartee attracted a claque of followers who would parrot his phrases: "They tried to learn somethin' (from him), and they'd take his words and put it on somebody else." In turn, some of Patton's wisecracks appear to have been stock barrelhouse banter. Willie Moore reported: "I'd hear him sayin' sometimes, (you) say: 'Well, I reckon I will go

to Brazil (i.e., the Delta town near Stover)'...He say: 'Oh man, your head's nappy and your feets is long...Your partner's goin': what you waitin' on?'" The St. Louis blues pianist Wesley Wallace uttered similar words in response to a line on Bessie Mae Smith's *St. Louis Daddy* (1929).

Besides relishing snappy repartee, Patton fancied himself a story-teller, and never relinquished an opportunity to titillate his friends with yarns. "Just like you and him was sittin' over there," House reported, "and you had a little snort or somethin' to get him *primed up* in his line, the rascal! Then: 'Well, now! I'm gonna tell you-all a little story!'—That's the way he'd go, like that." The chaste example of Patton's stories House found fit to reproduce seem to have been drawn from minstrel show material, and involved rhymes. "He used to tell...about the dog and the cat and the squirrel or somethin' like that; the guy that went huntin' and all that kinda stuff, and rhyme it out and it sound good...After he'd tell it and end it, everybody would just laugh it off...One about the turkey, that was a funny one he liked to tell:

> "What did the rooster-turkey say to the little brown hen?'
> "'You ain't laid a egg in God knows when!'
> "'What did the hen say to the rooster?'
> "'You don't come around as often as you usta!'"[6]

The opening couplets of Patton's *Banty Rooster,* one of his most famous songs, have a similar ring of stage patter.

Patton's wit usually ran to gamier subjects than the barnyard fable. Of his favorite jokes (which House was not bold enough to cite), the latter said: "They'd all be 'bad', 'bad' words and things." The women Patton seduced ("He thought he was some pigmeat back in those days," House remarked) were favorite fodder for jests. "Charlie's 'meddlesome' (i.e., given to accost women), that was his trouble," House maintained. "He'd 'meddle' all the time, and then get a big laugh off it..." Both House and Willie Brown found his sexual boasting tiresome by comparison to his animal rhymes, and House claimed that his eagerness to publicize his conquests frequently caused him to lose favor with the women he deceived by "talking trash" (fabricating affection). "They'd always be tryin' to get rid of 'im," House said of his casual pickups, "on account of that bullshit...that's what they'd get tired of." One of Patton's blues couplets seems to commemorate such a brush-off:

> Aw the moon has gone down, North Star (?) about to shine

> Rosetta Henry told me: "Lord, I don't want you hangin' 'round."

Patton retaliates by insinuating that the woman is a prostitute who caters to mill-hands:

> Oh where were you now babe, Clarksdale mill burned down?
> "I was way down Sunflower with my face all fulla frowns."

Given this propensity for low gossip it is not surprising that Son House declined to favor Patton with any confidence: "He'd tell most anything...*I* wouldn't trust him, 'cause he get a couple drinks and out it's comin'. He'll tell it if it'll send you to the 'lectric chair."

Patton's songs are rarely critical of women; while they routinely allude to his difficulties with them ("Trouble at home baby, tryin' to blow me down"), in almost no instance do they touch on the substance of these conflicts. By never making his problems with the opposite sex explicit, Patton betrayed the likelihood that he was the usual architect of his domestic difficulties, as one of his own couplets conceded:

> One of these mornin's, you know it won't be long
> You're gonna be mistreated and maybe I'll have to leave your home.
> (*Devil Sent The Rain)*

As a nomadic blues singer, Patton was basically a homeless person, as one of his tough-bitten song jokes indicated:

> No use of weepin', no use screamin' and cryin'
> For you know you got a home mama, long as I got mine.
> (*Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*)

Unlike most blues, which wallow in misfortune and seek to engage the sympathy of listeners, his songs say virtually nothing about his own reversals. Instead, they allude to other people's:

> Hot love is at your front door, blues are in your room

Callin' at your back door: "What is gonna become of you?"
(*Bird Nest Bound*)

While Patton's songs make only passing reference to drinking, it is generally agreed that this activity rivaled womanizing as his consuming extra-musical interest. Hayes McMullen said that the mere sight of a liquor bottle visibly excited him. According to House he was indiscriminate in his tastes for women and whiskey: "He'd drink anything if it wasn't poison. All he wanted to know: was people supposed to drink it." House, who valued Patton only as a drinking companion, recalled that he would frequently "fall out" (pass out) from corn liquor, for which he had a low tolerance.

Instead of spacing his drinks while performing, however, he regulated his diet. Miller recalled: "...He didn't want nothin' but fat meat, you know, sliced off the ham...He said that would keep you from gettin' drunk...He said the whiskey would eat on that, see...If you bring him a lean (slice of ham), he'd send it back and tell 'em to fix it right. And you know, a musician in them days, whatever he asked for, that's what he got."

But there were occasions when this popular remedy failed. Henry Austin, who appeared at "frolics" with Patton near Itta Bena in the late 1920s, said: "When he get high, he ain't gonna make much music, and if he know me and you, he's gonna start at us — just talkin' funny." When Hayes McMullen attended parties with Patton in the same period, the latter would invariably "fall drunk in a few minutes" and become completely incapacitated as a musician.

Were such pratfalls typical of him, Patton could not have successfully pursued a career in music. Other accounts credit him with unusual performing stamina. Elizabeth Moore, who said that "he drank but he never got drunk" when she saw him in the late 1920s, noted: "He could just steady-play: if he started at seven o'clock, why he'd play till four in the morning."

Booker Miller, who played regularly with Patton over the last four years of his life, noted: "...He could endure, you know what I mean? He didn't get tired and lay his box down and walk out like many musicianers would do, stand around talkin' about: 'I'm tired.' If it took all night, he'd be there with you. If you said: 'Start at seven o'clock,' he'd be right there. And you say: 'We goin' till daylight,' he'd be right there. You never would hear nobody comin' in sayin': 'Wonder where he at? Well, what's the matter with the music?' 'Cause it would be *goin'*. I never saw him get too drunk to play; he'd play anyhow. I don't know how, but he could do it; keep swayin'..."

Patton's belief that drinking made him a better performer has already been recounted. He admitted to Miller, however, that it adversely affected his picking

control: "He say that's the reason he didn't use picks. See, when he get kinda liquored up, you know, he hit 'em (his strings) too hard."

Liquor also affected Patton's demeanor to the point where his friends could usually tell when he had been drinking. "The thing about it," House said, "he talked different. That's what I went by. He talked in a way like he wasn't talkin' this mornin' when you saw him...He'd say things different, use his words different, and he had some kinda little old hatred in him."

Hayes McMullen agrees that liquor rotted Patton's temperament: "Now here was Charlie's trouble: Charlie, he was 'whiskey-headed', and of course when he got to drinkin' whiskey you couldn't tell him too much. He'd argue back." Patton's willingness to argue under such circumstances, however, did not necessarily mean that he started the argument in question. Barrelhouses and house "frolics" were havens for belligerent people, and Patton may have felt that his puniness obliged him to put up a constant show of strength.

Like his romantic overtures, Patton's pugnacity nearly always remained on the verbal level known as "woofing", a barrelhouse pastime Zora Neale Hurston described as "a sort of aimless talking. A man half seriously flirts with a girl, half seriously threatens to fight or brags of his prowess in love, battle, or financial matters."[7]

"He's a big *talker* until he thinks somebody's figurin' to fight," House said of him. Johnnie Mack recalled: "Sometimes he would get kinda fractious...make a lotta noise...It was mostly bluff...Everybody's thinkin' he's gonna do somethin', but everybody caught on to him." The only reason Patton's "woofing" carried any weight in the first place was because of its volume. "He just had a big mouth, and folks didn't know him, they'd think he could chin the moon by the sound of his voice," House said.

If a violent disturbance broke out around him at a house "frolic" Patton abandoned all pretense of pugnacity. Some of his retreats from the scene of a barrelhouse scrimmage had a comic twist, like the one occurring near Robinsonville later related by Son House: "Charlie got his guitar and come up the cottonfield to get to the road. Me and Willie Brown was comin' down the road. And we see the cottonstalks and things shakin'...I said: 'Willie, lookey yonder!' Me and him both got scared — we thought it was some kinda animal, you know! So — he run to the road, him an' his guitar, and he looked and seen me and Willie, and he went to talkin' to hisself: 'Yeah. Them son of a bitches! I'll kill *all* of 'em.'

"I said: 'How in the hell you gonna kill them all, fast as you'se comin' up that cottonfield?' We joked Charlie a long time about that."

Willie Morris cited Patton's novel means of escape when a brawl over a woman disrupted a "frolic" at the Red Gum plantation near Leland in the early

1930s: "One of them 'bad' white fellas used to have that, didn't 'low nobody (i.e., the police) on that place and them folks could do what they wanted to and wouldn't get 'rested. Me and Charlie was over there playin'...we was gettin' five dollars a night...Five dollars apiece. This guy starts shootin' and they all runned out and got in them cottonfields and them cornfields, man, and hid around there...Somebody was standin' at the door with one of them hobtail knives...snappin' everybody come out, and they all was hollerin' around there about they was shot, they was shot, but it wasn't nothin' but that guy standin' up there just pickin' 'em over with that knife. He didn't cut 'em bad...Charlie went up the chimney! Them big chimneys, you can get up there apiece...He stayed up there till the war was over."

"When they start fightin' or somethin' like that," Son House said, "he didn't forget that guitar! Him and that guitar were *gone*, brother! I never heard of him doin' no fightin'." Frank Howard, our only informant who ever saw Patton resort to his fists, characterized him as a "peaceful" person who only became "mean" if someone else "got him riled up," and who only fought defensively. "He'd get away if you let him, but now you held him up, he'd try to occupy you for a while," Howard noted.

However peaceful his intentions, Patton's sense of proprieties could only have set him at constant odds with the males of his audience. His possessiveness with women equalled their own. "Little Charlie Patton, he gonna *sure* squabble...raise a rough-house with anybody, you know what I mean, about a woman," Hayes McMullen says. House concurs: "He'd raise sand in a minute if he think you were foolin' with one of his women."

But at the same time, Patton considered any female fair game for his own attentions. "He called *anybody's* wife 'honey' and 'sugar'," reported Willie (Have Mercy) Young. "A real jealous man didn't have no business around Charlie Patton."

According to House he would accost practically any woman in his presence: "Oh, he's quick to meddle!" David Edwards qualifies this judgment, remarking: "Charlie never did 'meddle' nobody, but one thing he would do: he was a heavy drinker...and when he get fulla that stuff, he wants to 'clown' (show off), and be seen...He's just one of them old 'clownin" types, you know, but he wouldn't do it till he's drinkin'; 'clown' around with women."[8]

But what to an opportunistic blues singer was "clowning" (unserious flirting) was "meddling" to his male patron, who was quick to write his failure to observe this distinction in blood. Any match between Patton and such an adversary had ominous consequences for him, considering his puniness and his failure to avail himself (so far as is known) of any weapons. How Patton rationalized his flirtatious, sexually opportunistic behavior in the face of these

facts remains one of the great enigmas of his personality. "He say he want the friendship of a person," Frank Howard recalled. "He don't want nobody to be layin' to kill him or shootin' through a window or somethin'." Nevertheless, there must have been many occasions when Patton looked uneasily through his own window. That he had much apprehension over the intentions of others is indicated by Booker Miller's explanation of his usual banter as a ploy "to test the friendliness of people, see if they was friendly or unfriendly..."

The apostle of friendship well knew what it meant to create enemies in the Delta, for he had created them. At least twice in his career, he suffered disabling wounds, and when Miller met him he bore a scar on the side of his forehead that looked to be the imprint of a knife or a bottle. A number of his acquaintances refused to believe that he suffered a natural death, and considering his unsavory conduct within an unsavory environment, no one can fault their logic. The wonder is that he managed to survive.

Through The Past Darkly

"You're never gonna find out much about these old blues singers."—J. Mayo Williams, blues recording official

Survive Patton did, but not as a historical figure with a tangible past, and much of the factual data about his life remains nebulous. Because Southern blues were either completely disregarded or taken as the rude off-spring of W.C. Handy's imagination in the music literature of Patton's lifetime, one today approaches his life with no frame of reference other than his surviving recordings or the first-hand recollections of one-time associates, imparted decades after Patton's death. Needless to say, these recollections are piecemeal and often problematic. By the off-hand content of their reminiscences, the remnants of Patton's original audience the Delta yielded in the 1960s left no doubt that they had responded to Patton orgiastically, rather than reflectively. Consider, for example, Elizabeth Moore's breathless account of how she, as a teenage resident of Robinsonville, reacted to Patton's appearance there in the late Twenties:

"They tell me they gonna have a new guitar-player up here tonight! And say: 'He come from way down this road!'

"I say: 'Where?'

"'Down on the *Dog* line, hear?! You-all come out tonight!'

"'Okay!'...I been had a little drink...'fore I got there. When I walked in the door Charlie Patton was down on them *Backwater Blues*. I said: 'Mmmm!' I said: 'Aw, sho'!' They carried me back home that night."

Patton's encounters with fellow musicians often had an episodic, picaresque quality, bearing equally bleak tidings for the facts-oriented researcher. But a brusque professionalism sometimes punctuated their exchanges. Lake Cormorant's Willie Moore happened on him sometime before 1918 while wandering through the town of Hollandale in an aimless quest for party "action:"

"A boy say: 'It's some fella down there, man, named Charlie Patton!' An' say: 'He's in town.'

"I say: 'Oh, I see.'

"...He say: 'Yeah, you know what them boys told me?'...Say: 'Hot damn, he looks *like white folks*, almost'. An' say: 'You just ask at the first restaurant.'

"He say: 'A woman runs the cafe: he plays for them all the time.' And say: 'Her name is Chris Oliver.' I wrote it down on the back of a cigarette butt...When I got down there he was there. I say: 'That's got to be the fella!' — see, he's 'bright' (light-skinned), you know, an' his hair just laid back...

"He's just sittin' there, and another fella was there had a mandolin and a solo bass; them instruments was back there and out, but they wasn't playin'...

"...I said: 'Dis here is, uh, Mister Patton?'

"'Yeah,' he say...'Charlie Patton.'

"I say: 'This here's Moore!' I says: 'Look!' I says: 'Where could a man get a little 'light' job?'

"He say: 'What can you play?'

"I say: 'Well, I can play...most anything.'

"He say: 'Well, I tell you what to do.' He say: 'We got a dance tonight.' And he say: 'We won't start till eight o'clock.' And he say: 'You stay around me and when I go out I'll carry you with me.' He say: 'We'll run around here (i.e., Oliver's cafe) until about two-thirty...Then we'll knock up on a tune or two and see how we get together.'"

Moore's practice guitar-playing proved satisfactory for accompaniment purposes and he subsequently passed two nights as a member of Patton's performing entourage, which was probably assembled locally. Then he returned to his duties as a trouble-shooter for W.C. Handy's Memphis-based dance band, keeping in loose touch with Patton, who would sometimes contact him by mail regarding playing dates. Their social relationship was practically nil.

On the job, Patton tended to make laconic, impersonal conversation. "We would get ready and go on to the dance," recalled Booker Miller, the constant companion of his later years. "First thing we wanna do is get us a drink or two, and we would be playin'. We never did talk about, you know, too much of people or life: we just playin' and watchin' the folks and talkin' about what *they* was doin'."

When Patton's conversation turned to personal subjects it was not always to the delight, or edification, of his company. "He's the biggest liar ever was," Son House claimed, "and he's proud of it. He's a *sworn* (self-confessed) liar, that guy is: I didn't believe nothin' he said, no kinda way..."

Patton told his story in song, or so some thought. "Whatever events would come in his mind, and wear with him a while, he could play about it," Booker Miller said. "He'd write him a song and play about it." Though many of Patton's songs are stocked with blues commonplaces (which may not have been commonplaces when he first sang them), they no doubt contain numerous autobiographical touches. The example of his remarkable *Joe Kirby* indicates that Patton enshrined fleeting romantic attachments in short-lived song concoctions. This

obviously ephemeral product publicized Patton's strife-ridden domestic life, beginning with a swipe at his common-law wife Bertha Lee and registering his infatuation with a mistress of the moment, a blues singer named Louise Johnson who lived on the *Kirby* plantation near Robinsonville:

> Say I'll be your monkey baby, sure won't be your dog
> Says 'fore I'll stand your doggin' I'll, sleep in a hollow log.
>
> Some people say baby them, Kirby blues ain't bad
> An' it must not a-been them, Joe Kirby blues I had.
>
> ...Well I'm goin' where, Green River do run down
> 'Cause the woman I love Lordie, live in Robinsonville town.

A song of this sort obviously evaporated with the affair that inspired it. Its use of stock phrases (such as the second verse, which Patton dressed with various adjectives) would have permitted its ready resurrection, in slightly altered form, had Patton felt moved to sing of some other attachment.

Though Patton might wave his own scruffy linen in a recording like *Joe Kirby*, his standoffishness did not encourage others to ask him personal questions. Thus Booker Miller, who was intensely interested in his life, did not ask him why he had been forced off *Dockery's* plantation, an event Miller learned of through rumor, or how his throat had become scarred. "I often wanted to ask him (about the scar)," Miller said. "...I figured down the line somewhere he might *would* tell me. You know sometime you go to diggin' into things like that, you know; you kinda rile folks up." Patton (who was all too readily "riled up") did not think to enlighten Miller, though the incident that disfigured him took place during the course of their friendship.

Paradoxically, the remote researcher who pieces together fragmentary accounts of Patton's life attains a much fuller sense of it than was available to Patton's peers, and even most of his neighbors. Plantation society lacked the cohesiveness of the white Southern town as recalled by the Mississippi writer Eudora Welty: "...If you grew up in the South when things were relatively stable, when there was a lot of talk and so on, you get a great sense of a person's whole life. This is because you know all the families. You know several generations because they all live together. You know what happened to So-and-So clear through his life. You get a narrative sense of your next door neighbor..."[1]

The long-term plantation tenant was exceptional in Mississippi, and had no palpable existence except as a name in a commissary ledger. When the great Mississippi flood ravaged the Delta in April of 1927, *The New York Times* would report: "Scores have perished in the flood waters. The exact number may never be known, as there is no possible way to check the families of transient tenant farmers in many sections."

Whatever they thought of his morals, which invited titters or frowns from acquaintances, Patton's neighbors could not have been but baffled by his complexion. He lacked a single physical feature readily associated with the race to which he belonged, and those who knew him drew various conclusions regarding his ancestory. Hayes McMullen took him to be of partial Mexican extraction, as did Will Dockery's cook, Sara Garrett. "I believe he was mixed-up with Indian or somethin," David Edwards said. Son House also regarded him as part Indian. A neighbor from Ruleville who recalled him as a "kinda Injun-lookin' fella" reacted to his Paramount publicity photo with the question: "That's a white man, ain't it?"

Indeed, Patton's acquaintances were no doubt impressed by his resemblance to white people, but euphemised this impression by likening him to a suitably declassé ethnic minority. One of the few blues singers who was willing to imply white ancestory on Patton's behalf was Ishmon Bracey, who described him as "kinda light 'red'; 'red'-lookin' fella; wasn't betwixt an' between 'bright' and dark: he just kinda 'red'-lookin'." In the lexicon of the age, "red" signified white, a term doubtless produced by the sunburned facial appearance of the white Southerner.

Patton's appearance was particularly exotic in an acutely complexion-conscious society whose blood lines were legally drawn. At the time of his birth only fifteen percent of the lower South's black population was characterized by the census as "mulatto"—a catch-all term indicating only that the person so designated appeared to be a racial composite. This figure would have fallen appreciably without the inclusion of New Orleans, with its substantial Creole population.

By the white ideals of attractiveness that were generally accepted by blacks of his generation[2], Patton was considered handsome. "He was a fine-lookin' fella, I'm a-tell you," Willie Moore said. His friends, however, were inclined to make fun of his protruding ears: "His ears sit out...kinda wide," Son House relates. "They'se bigger than your ears—bigger than two of 'em: they'd (friends would) just make fun of 'em...Willie Brown, he called him 'a light-eared son-of-a-bitch'...He called him all kinda 'eared' things...But Charlie was better-lookin' than Willie..."

For all his pugnacity, Patton did not pull rank on swarthier associates like

House or Brown. The "good" (straight) hair that his friends unfailingly remarked on did not, according to House, noticeably turn his own head: "He looked like he didn't care nothin' about whether he had it or not." Nor, said House, did Patton have any aversion to dark-featured women ("he's crazy about everything wore a dress"), though he denigrated them in *Pony Blues*:

> Brownskin woman is like, somethin' fit to eat
> Oh but a jet-black woman, don't put your hand on me.

Patton no doubt perceived others (and was likewise perceived) in terms of the self-serving complexion stereotypes that ran rampant in his society. He trafficked in one such stereotype in *Mean Black Cat*, in which he is victimized by a bedroom interloper described only as a "mean black cat". With this phrase he made a then conventional equation between complexion and character:

> ...it is the black Negro who is regarded as mean, ignorant, primitive, and animal-like...Sometimes the comment of Negroes is very extreme, as in the case of two Negroes overheard discussing 'blackness'. One of them said: 'A black nigguh is the meanes' rascal God evah made!'[3]

Many blues songs contain (and even consist of) acriminous characterizations and accusations that are blatant expressions of spite. If one overlooks his *Mean Black Cat* and the brickbat heaved at the outset of *Joe Kirby*, Patton's songs are peculiarly mild-mannered for blues. Their general placidity is further established by the comic flourishes Son House considered unbecoming to blues singers. It may be that Patton, for all his combativeness, was loathe to assume the mantle of the mean-spirited blues singer, construing it as an unbecoming projection of blackness.

In complexion Patton bore a close resemblance to his parents, Annie Martin and William Patton (who was conceivably a stepfather). "His parents was both very 'bright'," Sara Garrett recalled. "Annie Patton and Bill Patton both was light-skinned people." She likened the proportions that led Son House to describe Charlie as "nothin' but a little runt" to those of his mother. Bill Patton, on the other hand, stood over six feet tall and was a man of considerable girth. If either parent was of Indian descent, theirs was a distinction shared by less than two percent of Mississippi's "colored population" (a census category that then included Indians) of 1880.

The Patton side of the clan was rooted in Tennessee and seems to

have originally been known as "Patten", the surname alloted to Charlie's grandfather John in census records. Born in 1840 (undoubtedly as a slave), he had settled in or been transported to Mississippi before the end of the Civil War, and fathered four children there between 1862 and 1875. Bill, the second or third of the brood[4], was born in either 1864 or 1866, most likely the latter year, which would have made him the next to youngest child. Other brothers and sisters may have perished in infancy, for a nine or ten year gap separates the ages of the children who remained alive in 1880.

By that year, apparently, John Patten's unknown wife was dead, and the care of the children entrusted to her twenty-five year old sister Ether, a native of Tennessee who lived with the family. The Pattens then resided in Coahoma County, one of the first Delta regions to be settled, and the probable location of Bill Patton's birth. Some 11,000 blacks (five times the number of resident whites) then claimed the county as their own.

Bill (who was subsequently known as "Patton") was not long for Coahoma County. In 1884, at age eighteen or twenty, he married Annie Martin, a native of Hinds County who was at least two years his senior, having been born in January of 1862. She was also of a higher social status, it would seem: she had learned to read and write, as Bill could not. Theirs must have been something of a shotgun wedding, for when it occurred the bride was at least six months pregnant.

For the first sixteen years of their marriage the Pattons seem to have lived in the hill country of Hinds County, which had been a region of small plantations at the time of Annie's birth and still remained so. All told the Pattons had seven children, one of whom had died by 1900. The first child, a daughter named Kitty, arrived in March of 1884. Viola, the second born (in January of 1887), proved the hardiest of the lot, surviving until 1969. The third daughter and final family addition, Etha (probably named for Bill's maternal aunt), was born in August of 1899 and appears to have died in childhood.

In the early 1890s, when Charlie was still a toddler, his father defected from the household, leaving his mother with the oppressive task of caring for two small children and wresting a livelihood sharecropping. Though the circumstances of his departure are unknown, his later reputation for sedateness within the lax environment of the Delta leads one to suspect that he may have resented his wife's attentions to a rival. In any event, Annie Patton maintained herself, two daughters, and Charlie on a two or three thousand acre cotton and corn plantation known as *Heron's* place. It was on this farm, which stood four miles south of Bolton and four miles north of Raymond and was separated by a creek from the adjoining *Gaddis and McLaurin* plantation (the largest in

the vicinity), that Charlie Patton was evidently born. "That was wonderful country out there," Sam Chatmon said of the area.

Heron's bore the name of its founder Sam Heron, a one-time slaver who was reputedly related to the Chatmons. "...He messed with my mother's mother, got mama by her," said Sam, who adopted Heron's Christian name after rejecting his own (Vivian) as sissified. "...Made her daddy be a white man".[6] Even when the plantation passed into the hands of Heron's sons Willie and Robert (around 1906), the Chatmons (who lived on *Gaddis and McLaurin*) were extended special cordiality by the owners. "Anytime we'd be around," Sam recalled, "anybody'd say anything, they'd take it up. They'd say: 'Look, don't talk about them Chatmons, leave 'em alone.' If we got in a fuss or somethin', Herons'd come up and tell 'im: 'You go home, I want the Chatmons to stay on the land.'"

Although the Heron brothers had a local reputation for being "mean" to both races (as a child, the bluesman Walter Vinson was warned by his mother to keep away from their plantation), their father, Sam held, "was nice to everybody. He just liked colored folks. He'd have places for 'em to gamble, places for 'em to drink, places for 'em to lay in a big shed and sleep there when they got sleepy. It was a jukehouse, and he run a big store, and he'd have music there..."

The first musician Charlie Patton probably ever heard was a *Heron's* tenant named Lem Nichols. He was forty or fifty at the turn of the century and was noted for "rag" ditties like *Spoonful* (which Patton would convert into a personal showpiece) and *Pearlee*, played with a pocket knife. Although too young to visit *Heron's* jukehouse, Patton doubtless enjoyed the plantation's favorite form of childhood recreation, hobby horses. "They'd carry you for about five or maybe ten minutes for a nickel," Sam Chatmon said. The plantation's chief novelty, for children and adults alike, was its races: "The people on his place would raise great big, fine horses...They'd have them races every Sunday evenin': it would draw hundreds of folks there...They had a road run straight out about a mile and a half or two miles. The horses'd be comin' up to it, just flyin'. Man, everybody'd be whoopin' and hollerin'."

An early infatuation with horses is pointed up in the third stanza of Patton's *Pony Blues*:

> Got a bran' new Shetland, mare already trained
> Better get you a saddle, tighten up on the rein.

The Shetland was essentially a children's pet.

Adult blues specialists are likewise prone to childish infatuations, one of

which concerns the muddled matter of Patton's birth year and its imagined implications in tracing the development of blues. Patton's current-day mystique as a blues singer is largely based on illusionary reckonings of his age, coupled with a notion that blues were coming of age as he was. It is improper to extol Patton as a blues pioneer in any circumstances, for no one knows when blues developed, or where they developed.

The exaltation of Patton as a pioneer blues singer involves a curious deafness to the history his own music proclaims. From a musical standpoint Patton is more sophisticated than the blues form he employed. He is simply too skilled and too given to embellishments to pass muster as a pioneer blues player. Had blues been an entirely new musical word when he took up the form he would have had no reason to impose his individuality on it. His music assumes that his listeners are jaded by blues, and will thus applaud the novelties he brings to the idiom.

Patton's status as a pioneer has been partly fostered by a gauche calculation as to what makes for a sophisticated blues. Ever since W.C. Handy made use of twelve bar blues stanzas, blues has been wrongly construed as a "form" involving twelve bars. The musician who does not observe this stereotyped phrasing pattern is considered archaic, primitive, or rustic as a result. To listen to pieces like Patton's *Pony Blues* (which begins with a fourteen bar stanza) or *Down The Dirt Road* (which uses thirteen and a half bar stanzas) from such a vantage point[7] is to fancy that one is listening to early blues effusions.

Basically, a blues is simply a song that alternates brief vocal and instrumental phrases (usually forming a stanza of three such combinations), all of which invariably end on keynotes. A twelve bar blues usually consists of ten beat vocal phrases paired with six beats of instrumentation, the last two of which are typically a filler tonic strum. This pattern (which Patton faithfully regurgitates on *Pea Vine*, *Joe Kirby*, and *Mean Black Moan*), lacks symmetry: at best it offers predictability, which allows for easy ensemble playing. In *Down The Dirt Road* Patton created stanzas of three eighteen beat lines that presupposed his acquaintance with conventional blues phrasing. He began the last word of each vocal line on the obligatory tenth beat, which was followed by the conventional measure of guitar riffing. However, Patton held each phrase-ending word so that it cascaded through this measure. To provide further space for this extension and allow for a brief vocal rest, he completed each line with a second measure of instrumentation (a guitar strum). He used an identical pattern in creating the title stanza of *Pony Blues*, except that he tossed in two additional beats of strumming in playing the stanza's final phrase.

There is no logical process by which this pattern could be converted to a twelve bar blues by a more "sophisticated" musician. For that matter, no logical

process underlies the twelve bar blues phrasing pattern. Its prevalence on 1920s blues recordings attested not to formalism or sophistication, but to the fact that blues musicians of the period were parrots or primitives with a command of few phrasing patterns. Outside of W.C. Handy and other band musicians, there was probably not a single blues singer of the period who was conscious of performing twelve bar blues. Those who did had simply memorized a pattern.

Though Patton had no difficulty with routine blues patterns, he may never have succeeded at memorizing his age. "That's one thing you couldn't get him to talk about," Son House reported, "how old he was. He never say nothin' about his age." It was not until 1912 that Mississippi required the formal registration of births, and House was certain that neither Patton nor his playing partner Willie Brown ever new their true ages: "Willie would say: 'Charlie is much older than I is!' I say: 'No kidding!' Well, Willie wasn't no baby. Willie didn't even know how old he was his own self. Both of them was ignorant to things like that."

In 1963, Patton's sister Viola stated that he was born in 1887; an ex-wife, Minnie Franklin, volunteered the same birth year. Sam Chatmon's older sister Josephine Williams, who remembered Charlie as a child on *Heron's* plantation, noted: "I'se born in 1886...I was a little older than him." Dick Bankston, an early Patton imitator who was born in 1897, balked at the suggestion that Patton was as much as ten years older than himself. Frank Howard, who met Patton in December of 1921, recalled: "He told me at the time I got acquainted with him he was thirty-one years old." A doctor who treated Patton for a heart ailment in April of 1934 subsequently listed his age as forty-four on his death certificate. As this figure must have likewise come from Patton, it would seem certain that he reckoned his own birthdate as falling between December of 1889 and April of 1890. But this reckoning was faulty: in 1900 his parents told census officials that he had been born in April of 1891.

It is not to be wondered that Patton considered himself a year older than he actually was. The individual of his time and place lived almost completely beyond the tentacles of the institution, whose embrace has since made it impossible for an individual to exist without periodically reporting his birthdate on myriad forms. Except in registering for the draft and submitting to an arrest for drunkeness, Patton was probably never required to answer any questions concerning his age. Thanks to his family's poverty, it is easy to imagine that he passed his childhood birthdays with no celebration of the occasion. If Patton began frequenting barrelhouses in his early teens, as he no doubt did, it would have been to his social advantage to add as many extra years to his age as might pass muster with older running-mates. Had he formed an early habit of falsifying his age, he could well have gradually forgotten his actual age, and thus overestimated it when he spoke to Frank Howard and his physician.

Save for the greying hair that became visible during the last few years of his life, Patton's adult appearence bore no clues by which others could surmise his real age, though Ishmon Bracey correctly viewed him as "close to forty...middle-aged" when he made his recording debut at age thirty-eight. Son House, who met him several months afterwards in late 1929 or early 1930, says: "At the time I got acquainted with him, Charlie at least had to have been...near about fifty years old. I knowed he was every bit and grain that much: not *under* fifty." To Booker Miller, who knew him in the same period, Patton looked to be about thirty-five years old. Hayes McMullen could see no discrepancy between Patton's appearance in the late 1920s and the features he bore in a portrait taken at least two decades earlier, when he had not reached twenty. "It's just like him to me," he says of the portrait. "He never did look old, to my judgment."

The question of Patton's true paternity cannot be resolved as readily as that of his age. Perhaps facetiously, it was thrown into doubt by Lonnie and Bo Chatmon when the two musicians[9] returned from a Delta jaunt in the 1920s to their family home on the *Gaddis and McLaurin* plantation. They bore a Delta-born story that Charlie was their half-brother. "His mama musta told Charlie about it, who his daddy was," Josephine Williams later speculated. "...The boys would tease papa about him, but papa never would say nothin'."

"Papa" was Henderson Chatmon (1850-1934), a bearded farmer and square dance fiddler of mixed racial origins whose grandmother, he once related, had been captured by slave traders on the Niger River. "His mother was the marster's daughter," Josephine reported. "The old marster, when papa's mother was born...he carried her up to his house. And the old missus treated her just like she did one of her own...That was in slavery." Henderson's own musical career would socially perpetuate this blood-tie; having learned fiddle from a planter named Bob Lacy during slavery, he became a favorite at Lacy's own dances. "...Papa said they worry him so! Just walkin' all over the road and hollerin'."

While living on Doctor Dupree's plantation some ten or twelve miles from *Heron's*, Henderson had courted Annie Patton in the early 1890s. "Her husband wasn't with her then," said Josephine, who remembered their affair from her own girlhood. "She was a loose woman..." Whether his intimacy with Annie resulted in Charlie's birth is unknowable. It is also possible that Charlie's rumored status as a half-brother arose from the fact that one of the six sons who had been raised within the Chatmon household[10] was a child of Annie Patton's. His wife Eliza (a woman twenty five years his junior whom he had married in 1875) was not only tolerant of his regular infidelities, but possessive of their illegitimate children, who were legion. (At one family reunion, his son Sam claimed, forty

or fifty such children were present.) When, for example, she was struck by a resemblance between her husband and a girl she noticed while shopping in Bolton, she accosted the mother: "Mama," Sam reported, "...told her...: 'This baby's just like Chatmon...This is Chatmon's child, won't you let her go home with me and stay some so she can get used to her daddy?'"

Although Sam's own boyhood photograph bears a curious resemblance to Patton's publicity picture, no such comparisons occurred to Lonnie and Bo Chatmon. "They said he looked real dark, like his mama," said Josephine, who haughtily recalled Charlie as an "ugly" baby, darker than herself or her brothers, but lighter than his mother: "When he's little he was a brownskin...He was a little lighter than his mama; his mama was kinda black...She had 'good' hair, but it wasn't straight. It was pretty nappy; she wasn't no Indian."

If any of the three boys Annie Patton reared were actually off-spring of Henderson Chatmon, the likely candidate is Willie Patton, who was born on August 8, 1894, or within Josepine's recollection of their affair. Willie, or "Son" as he was called, had a lighter complexion but coarser hair than Charlie, as did Henderson Chatmon. "Now 'Son' Patton, his hair was 'bad' as mine," Son House recalled. "It wasn't near like Charlie's, and I'd say to myself—I wouldn't say it to *them* now: 'Now they brothers: there's somethin' happenin' *some* kinda way."

That the "something" involved Willie rather than Charlie or the third brother (William, known as "Will C.", who was born in 1895) is indicated by the fact that his existence was not acknowledged by the parent (or parents) who enumerated the five Patton children to census-takers at the turn of the century. The most likely explanation of this omission is that Bill Patton balked at conferring the status of son upon him.

Whatever the relationship (if any) between any Patton children and Henderson Chatmon, the Patton family did not publicize it, and the *Dockery's* plantation community in which they eventually settled regarded Bill Patton as the natural head of the entire household. The death certificates of Charlie, Willie, and Viola all list him as their father, and by Sara Garrett's account he was on good terms with Charlie.

Bill Patton's reunion with his wife was apparently effected shortly after Henderson became a tenant of the *Gaddis and McLaurin* plantation in 1895, at which point he ceased visiting *Heron's*. Then, Josephine recalled, the Pattons "left outta there and went down by Edwards..." Although the family's tenture in Edwards (nine miles west of Bolton) formed but a brief interlude in Charlie's boyhood, he came to be regarded as one of its natives in the minds of some later associates.

The town was then known as Edward's Depot and served as a way station

between Vicksburg (eighteen miles westward) and Jackson (twenty-six miles eastward) on the Alabama and Vicksburg train line. It had originally been founded in the wake of the Vicksburg race riots of December, 1874 that witnessed the ouster of the town's black sheriff and foreshadowed the end of carpetbag rule in Mississippi. As a contemporary journalist wrote: "The Vicksburg riot was a severe blow to the prosperity of that town: much of its traffic has gone off to Edward's Station, which has grown in a few months to be a large and busy place...This is what has built up Edward's Station, where the colored men do not hear so much talk about the Caucasian race and the 'damned nigger' as at Vicksburg."[11]

When the Pattons lived in the vicinity, Edward's Depot showed some promise of developing into a black cultural center: it housed the publisher of a black newspaper (*New Light*, established in 1888) and boasted a secondary school providing Tuskegee-styled industrial and ministerial training for its pupils. But it is doubtful that Charlie Patton stood to benefit from such developments: he never learned to read or write and could spell but a single word — his own first name — by oral recitation. "'C-h-a-r-l-i-e,' that's the way he'd spell it," recalled Son House.[12] "He could spell his own name; that was all he could spell...but he couldn't even write his name after spelling it."

He may never have seen the inside of a schoolhouse: at the turn of the century, when nearly half of Mississippi's black residents were officially illiterate, fewer than sixty per cent of its black children between the ages of five and eighteen were even enrolled in school, and fewer yet attended classes on anything approaching a regular basis. Some twenty two per cent of Mississippi children between the ages of ten and fourteen were officially illiterate, so Patton (then nine) was backwards by contemporary standards.

The root of this disparity was no doubt the fact that Patton was the family's first-born son. Upon his small shoulders would have fallen the primary task of contributing to the family upkeep. At the turn of the century it was not uncommon to see children of six toiling in the cottonfields, and Patton's unenviable position as one of these children is indicated by the fact that he had yet to enroll in school by the time he reached his ninth birthday. His sisters Viola (then thirteen) and Kitty (then sixteen) were both attending school at the turn of the century, and both could read and write.

As an adult Patton was to display a marked aversion to plantation labor, possibly because he had performed a disproportionate share of it as a child. He flaunted his laziness as a badge of musical success. On *Heart Like Railroad Steel* he made a joking rhetorical overture to a female, offering to perform what were children's plantation tasks on her behalf:

Cut your kindlin', I will make your fire
I will tote your water, from the boggy bayou

The implication was that he would do no more.

If Patton passed any time in school he would have been treated as an interloper there. It was not until 1918 that Mississippi mandated compulsory education for either race, and teachers of the period looked askance at the plantation pupil. "They'd always teach the town ones first and let the country children more or less sit on one side," Sam Chatmon recalled. "...They'd have they classes and leave us behind: plenty times the town children warm up by the heater, and they make the country children go back and wait."

Even among country cousins Patton was to cut a humorous and baffling figure of backwardness, thanks to his peculiar pronunciation. "He didn't just speak plain like you and me," said Booker Miller, who laughed openly at Patton's diction as he listened to his recording of *Pea Vine Blues*. Miller found both his speaking and singing difficult to decipher, remarking of the latter: "Sometimes I can understand him and sometimes I can't...See, he got a drag; he got a accent, looks like cuts his speech or somethin'..." When Miller provided the previously obscure opening phrase of *Down The Dirt Road* ("I'm goin' away, to a world unknown") he explained: "You just have to know him...He drags his words; that makes him hard to understand."

As a performer Patton ordinarily bid for his listeners' attention by means of his colorful, expressive delivery rather than the content of his songs, which was less individual than his guitar work. In a dance setting his lyrics were secondary to the rhythm he provided, for which reason they were generally discursive.

Though Patton was never hired for his abilities as a versifier he did have a blues sensibility. His songs not only reflected an aversion to a popular understanding of blues as an expression of strife or conflict, but represented another understanding of blues that dated at least to the turn of the century. To Patton blues represented a succession of personal experiences, chiefly dramatized as recent or imminent actions on the part of their first person narrator. This assumption is implicit in his lyrics and in his spoken interjection on Louise Johnson's *Long Ways From Home* (1930): when she sings "...I woke up this mornin', blues all around my bed," Patton instructs her: "Tell 'em what happened to you!"

Patton's grasp of blues as a happenstance or a set of happenstances with no explicit sentimental overtones was no doubt drawn from the church, for it bears the imprint of the Wesleyan doctrine of religion as an "experience". This notion had permeated the nineteenth century black spiritual and its early twen-

tieth century successor. Instead of telling a story, or affirming faith as such, the spiritual expressed the transport of the revivalist, or told of the "experience" of the convert:

> Went down to de low groun'; went dere to pray;
> My feet been taken out de miry clay.[13]

Virtually all of Patton's couplets referred to events that were, if not actual, entirely plausible happenstances. The Patton couplet frequently had no dimension beyond its presentation of a petty experience:

> I went to the depot, I looked up at the board
> An' the train has left where it's steamin' all up the road.
> (*Hammèr Blues*)

By a process that cannot be charted, the blues lyric gradually became a depiction of a single experience: that of "having the blues". This development was largely fostered by blues recording which began in 1920, for it was only the previous year that W.C. Handy characterized blues as "happy-go-lucky songs". Though Patton made some concessions to this upstart understanding of blues, he was basically a stranger to it. His only full-scale attempt to make a song out of a frown, *Mean Black Moan*, appeared to be a presentation of a female's experience.

Within his own *metier* Patton did not balk at representing the "experiences" and conflicts of other people. He portrayed three people in *Banty Rooster*, a humorous song suggested by a black farm superstition holding that the crowing of a rooster signified the approach of a stranger.[14] With this thought in mind, a farmer determines to catch out his wife's "back door man" by getting such a bird:

> Oh I'm gonna buy me a banty, put him at my back door
> Cause see a stranger comin', he'll flap his wings an' crow.

His wife ridicules this fancy, prompting a stubborn rejoinder.

> "What you want with a rooster? He won't crow 'fore day."

> "What you want with a man when he won't do nothin' he say?"

When his rival sneers at his possessiveness towards a sexually unresponsive partner, the farmer squelches him with a smart retort:

> "What you want with a hen won't cackle when she lay?"
> "What you want with a woman when she won't do nothin' I say?"

These couplets could have arisen as minstrel jokes. The originality of his couplets mattered less to Patton than their suitability as nuggets of experience, and their sources range from nursey rhymes and Biblical phrases[15] to *Oh, Susannah!*, from which he lifted the verse:

> It was late one night, everything was still
> I could see my babe upon a lonesome hill.
> (*Green River Blues*)

Because the ordinary experiences of blues singers were products of a mutual life style, their couplets were often drawn from each other. The traveling blues entertainer sang not as an individual, but as a social type, and a member of a professional fraternity. Listening to the title couplet of *Down The Dirt Road*, quoted below, Booker Miller exclaimed: "Oh, man! That was our *slogan*."

> I can't go down the dirt road by myself
> I don't carry my rider gonna carry me someone else.

There is no reason to doubt that Patton coined some of the most popular slogans of Mississippi blues singers, just as he must have borrowed others. But only his paraphrases are apparent. The opening phrase of *Moon Going Down* ("Oh the moon is goin' down baby, North Star a-bound to shine") arose from a spiritual of slave vintage:

> The moon run down in purple stream
> The sun forbear to shine
> An' every star disappear
> King Jesus shall be mine.[16]

The second couplet ("Oh where were you now babe, Clarksdale mill burnt down?") was transformed from an *a capella* song current in Missisippi in 1909:

> O where were you when the steamer went down,
> Captain?
> "I was with my honey in the heart of town."[17]

Patton even made a song from scraps of his own songs. Booker Miller said: "He had one piece he used to play a stanza out of every song he played, each song; put it together, and make a song out of that."

Patton's illiteracy posed no handicap to his blues versification, but precluded a first-hand knowledge of the Bible whose authority he accepted unquestionably. In *Magnolia Blues* he sang:

> Got up this mornin'
> "I said my 'fore day prayer."
> I didn't have me nobody
> Speakin' Bible here.

To fully "experience" religion, Patton needed someone to recite the Scripture to him. His recapitulations of the spirituals that had no doubt saturated his youth were so lyrically erratic that Son House took them to be Patton's own inventions: "It was his own make-up...He'd have it (a spiritual) all kinds of ways—I know that wasn't true...Some of the Christian people hear that, they know it ain't the truth; they know he's lyin'." In his periodic outbursts of "Bible talk" Patton was forced to rely on his mangled memory of other people's sermons. He was no doubt unable to distinguish between the words of sacred songs and actual Biblical text, for in *Prayer Of Death* he confounds the two while reciting a deathbed prayer:

> Yes the wages of sin are death
> The gift of God: eternal life
> Mm Lordie.

> He said He's a rock in a weary land:
> A shelter in the time of storm.

What for Patton represented the word of Jesus was actually a turn of the century white hymn authored by Ira Sankey, *A Shelter In The Time Of Storm*:

> Oh Jesus is a rock in a weary land
> A shelter in the time of storm.[18]

Patton's essential naivety is demonstrated by the Fundamentalist themes he emphasized in song. He was powerfully drawn to its "pie in the sky" aspect, which promised to sweeten the life he reduced to "trials" in *Some Happy Day* and "trouble" in *Prayer Of Death.* In launching a feverish sermon based on Revelation in *You're Gonna Need Somebody When You Die,* he equipped paradise with a sheltering rock that had no textual foundation:

> And: a big rock that you can set behind: the wind can't blow at you no mo'.
> And: you gonna count the four and twenty elders that you can sit down an' talk with
> An' that you talk about your trouble you come —
> World that you just come from.

As a youth Patton was doubtless baptized, despite Son House's quip concerning him and Willie Brown: "Wouldn't nobody dip those guys — them guys (were) scared to take a bath!" He and his family could well have been captivated by the glittering visions and airy promises of the flimsiest Fundamentalism, for earth offered no treasures to them. While Hinds County was Mississippi's most populous and prosperous farm region when the Pattons lived there, its prosperity lay well beyond their grasp, and local conditions promised a bleak life of unrelenting hardship. Cotton prices between 1891 and 1895 were lower than those of any subsequent period before the Great Depression. It may have been these reversals (blamed on overproduction), a severe drought in 1896 that blighted many hill farms, the lynching of a black in Edwards the following April, or a local yellow fever epidemic that erupted in 1897 that caused the Pattons to set their sights on a Delta so forbidding it was then known as the "Death House".[19] In any event, the Pattons decamped for the Delta in 1900, or soon therefter.[20] Their departure from the hills may have been provisional, but proved permanent; and when a blues singer named Henry Austin would idly question the occasion of Charlie's presence in Edwards in the 1920s, he would quip: "Makin' money."

It was in the Delta that Patton developed the skills that enabled him to make money as a musician, and in the Delta that he must have been given his earliest taste of blues music. We have scant knowledge of turn of the century Delta music, but this smattering is highly suggestive. Around 1900, when 78,500 guitars were manufactured[21], a middle-aged Clarksdale guitarist named Alec Lee played a medley of *Poor Boy, Long Ways from Home* and *My Bucket's*

Got A Hole In It.[22] The originator of this work (which Lee played with a pocket knife) seems to have set two existing airs to guitar, with no express intention of performing blues. It was meant as a showpiece, probably for audiences that were not accustomed to guitar music, at least played with a fretting implement. The version that Gus Cannon learned from Lee and subsequently recorded in 1927 reveals that nothing fundamental took place in the realm of blues structure between the turn of the century and the 1920s.

The first part of the medley was a two chord twelve bar blues ditty, assembled in a crazy-quilt way. Its first phrase concluded an eleven beat vocal line ("Bein' a poor boy, I'm a long ways from home") with a ten beat plucked guitar figure, followed by a single beat rest, such as would not occur in a dance tune. The second phrase paired a measure of singing with six beats of tonic chord strumming. The final phrase repeated the same six beat strum after a ten beat vocal phrase (the only one with a keynote ending). The implications of this arrangement are that the "ten-six" phrasing cliche that pervaded 1920s blues recordings must have been a component of turn of the century blues, and had already grown so hackneyed by that period that the originator of *Poor Boy* sought to surprise listeners by revamping it.

Poor Boy would seem to have been the work of a hoboing street singer, and could have originated anywhere. In and of itself it was an insubstantial song; the vocal air was little more than a pretext for the instrumentation that followed it. Except in the third verse there was no attempt to integrate its vocal and instrumental lines, and the vocal lines were rendered all but *a capella*, with only a fleeting V chord in the third phrase providing skeletal accompaniment. Its initial vocal phrase ended amateurishly on a weak beat. For all the apparent spontaneity of the instrumentation, it was to become a cut-and-dried repertoire piece: fifteen years after Gus Cannon learned it, Eugene Powell acquired a note-for-note rendition of it in the Sunflower County town of Lombardy (twenty five miles from Clarksdale) from a middle-aged local guitarist named Prince Flowers. Charlie Patton, too, obviously heard this tune, for he would embellish one of its instrumental glissandos (played over three beats of *My Bucket's Got A Hole In It*) to "talk" the title of *Spoonful*.

The real import of *Poor Boy* lies in the fact that its creator was attempting to commercialize his music by contriving a novelty that the average guitarist of the period would have found difficult to duplicate. His Mississippi contemporaries who played for plantation dances appear to have been musical collectivists by comparison.

Of the arrival of blues in the Delta, Booker Miller said: "I think they were here a little before 1900, because my grand-daddy was a guitar-player...I was born in 1910, and he stopped when I was two." Miller's grandfather, a native

of the Sunflower County town of Indianola named Jim Brown, had played guitar since his boyhood, which must have dated to the 1880s, if not earlier. The songs he continued to play for his own amusement after quitting the house party circuit included *Hesitation Blues* and a song that began with a verse Patton would sing in *Pony Blues*:

> Hello Central, the matter with your line?
> Come a storm last night an' tore the wire down.

Despite its title and its twelve bar format, the widely-known *Hesitation Blues* had no musical kinship with blues.[23] It was basically a vocal ditty without true instrumental figures. The Delta favorites of Miller's grandfather's time (1880-1910) seem to have been similar repertoire pieces that were neither regionally nor individually distinctive, and placed no emphasis on instrumentation in the fashion of blues. Listening to *Stack O'Lee* as sung by Papa Harvey Hull and "Long Cleve" Reed, Miller said: "That's way back there in my grand-daddy's time. All that stuff was all through the Delta; that was popular then." He similarly said of their *Gang Of Brownskin Women*: "That sounds kinda like what my grand-daddy used to play. *Way* back." The latter eight bar air remained a standard repertoire tune among later blues musicians, and was recorded by Patton as *Jim Lee Blues* in 1929. W.C. Handy heard it performed by vagrants in East St. Louis who called their rendition *East St. Louis Blues* and devised a song of "experience" from their meager pickings as panhandlers:

> I walked all the way to East St. Louis town
> And I did not have but one poor lousy dime.[24]

As with *Poor Boy, East St. Louis* demonstrates the apparent antiquity of the typical blues phrasing pattern. While its first four bars were phrased in six beat vocal clumps (with two beat instrumental fills dividing them), its second and final phrase used the "ten-six" scaffolding of the ordinary blues line. Yet the "six-two" pattern seems to have dominated the architecture of turn of the century Mississippi plantation dance music. *Stack O'Lee* was based on the same phrasing pattern, as was *Spoonful*, which Hayes McMullen (b. 1902) learned as a pre-adolescent from a native of Charleston named Stanford Bennett, who was then old enough to be his father. (Similarly, in 1906 or 1907 Sam Chatmon heard the tune performed by an adult musician in Bolton named Dave Henderson.) The first piece McMullen learned ("as a little bitty boy") was a variant of *Frankie And Johnnie* called *Hop Joint* that was based on the same pattern. Numerous such songs, which were sometimes called "rags", appear to have

been in vogue around the turn of the century. More melodic but less percussive than blues, they were sung unexpressively (to judge from the example of 1920s recordings) and offered little scope for the individual performer to impose his musical personality (if he had one) on his material. This lack was probably not evident to the performers of "rag" ditties, because they had no need to attain individuality in a plantation dance setting. A paradox that confronts any chronicler of Patton's music lies in the fact that it is informed by the same individualistic and showy impulse that underlies *Poor Boy*, the apparent work of a hoboing street singer, rather than the conformist spirit of the plantation performers who trafficked in works like *Stack O'Lee*. Yet his known environment was that of the plantation: "he's a 'planey' boy," Richard Harney said of him.

Whatever occasioned Patton's individualism, it needed a forum for its exercise, and for this reason his family's move to the Delta was critical to his development. While there was not enough money in the hills to sustain a professional blues career, the Delta offered a unique opportunity to the musician who was shrewd and talented enough to tap its riches. For in addition to the ordinary house "frolics" that were a conventional feature of plantation life throughout the state, the Delta offered a performing outlet that was ordinarily available only in Mississippi towns, like Vicksburg. This forum was the "barrelhouse" or "jukehouse", an urban innovation that was probably imported to Mississippi from cities such as Memphis. The barrelhouse was a commercially operated recreation spot that contained several rooms and served as an all-purpose gambling den, dance hall, bar, brothel, and even boarding house. In the Mississippi Delta such establishments opened Friday evening and remained in continuous operation through Sunday. "They'd stay alla night long," Elizabeth Moore said. "Called 'em 'All night clubs.'"

In this respect they resembled the plantation house "frolics" that predated the existence of barrelhouses and offered a similar range of amusements, sans prostitution. Though the "frolic" (usually staged by a bootlegger as a means of selling his product) was organized on the same mercenary principles as the barrelhouse, it catered to the tenants of the plantation on which it was held. The barrelhouse, ordinarily situated near a town depot, was open to the broad public and patronized by people from widely scattered settlements. Some Delta clubs regularly attracted patrons from Memphis. According to the Moores it was not uncommon for someone to travel thirty miles to a Delta barrelhouse, which was often given a formal name and was further distinguished by a green exterior. "You always knew where them jukehouses was because they was green," Willie Moore said. "I don't remember 'em bein' no other color."

Owing to its influx of outsiders, the Delta barrelhouse could generate enormous profits, chiefly from the gambling that was its commercial *raison*

d'etre. Elizabeth Moore, who once operated a barrelhouse in Friar's Point, estimates that a prosperous Delta barrelhouse could anticipate a Saturday night revenue of approximately $1000, while netting upwards of $1500 for an entire week-end.[25]

These profits were not honestly acquired. Thanks to the invariable rigging of its retinue of dice and card games,[26] most of those who tested their luck at Delta barrelhouses had no chance of winning. The patron was pitted against a house gambler who was well-versed in the fine points of cheating, though he stood a chance of obtaining a refund from the management if he complained about the sharp tactics of his opponent. Willie Moore, who periodically worked as a house gambler in various Delta barrelhouses, said that the rare patron who won was then obliged to pay a five percent surcharge to the club.

Blues singers who played in barrelhouses basically functioned as shills for the establishments, and Patton would seem to have been no exception. In *Moon Going Down* he touts the women one could meet in a barrelhouse, who were most likely prostitutes:

> They'se a house over yonder, painted all over green
> Some of the finest young women Lord a man most ever seen.

In what smacks of false naivety on Patton's part, the luckless gambler of *Jim Lee* loses because of a lapse in concentration:

> I was sittin' down, playin' Coon-Can
> I lose all my money but a-one lil' lousy dime.
>
> Studyin' about my woman, could hardly Coon my hand
> Studyin' about my woman could hardly Coon my hand.

The Delta barrelhouse was not only a clip joint, but a front for white planters, who may have decreed its existence in the interests of preventing wages from gravitating to the Beale Street barrelhouse. "...They'd be runnin' the barrelhouse for them white folks," Willie Moore said of the black manager, known as the "house man". "...The white man'd put the money up, you see...White man would have a colored man to keep it straight..." Although this arrangement was doubtless a product of the caste system, the cost of establish-

ng a barrelhouse (which Willie Moore estimated at "four-five hundred dollars") virtually decreed white investment. So did the illegality of barrelhouse activity. According to Elizabeth Moore, the Delta barrelhouse vouchsafed its existence by pay-offs to local sheriffs, who sometimes staged sham raids but were only disposed to board up a club if a homicide occurred there.

Preventing the possibility of violence was a major preoccupation of the "house" man, who worked as a floorwalker (sometimes in tandem with an assistant) and bouncer, and was always armed. Violence was epidemic at plantation house "frolics", where, as Son House put it, the patrons "wanna see some runnin' done..." House recalled: "They'se a little more careful with the ukehouse..."

Willie Moore said of barrelhouse managers: "They didn't want no killin' goin' on, 'cause the man couldn't make no money then." An establishment that acquired a reputation for violence not only risked its legal immunity but lost business, and Elizabeth Moore knew of Delta establishments that folded for want of customers after bloodlettings occurred there. The emphasis on security that differentiated the barrelhouse from the house "frolic" (where patrons were free to carry weapons) served a second purpose: it lessened the risk of robbery by a patron.[27]

Upon arriving at a barrelhouse, the patron was subjected to a search. He was allowed to check the weapons that were forbidden even in the least respectable establishments (including guns, razors, knives, and brass knuckles) with the "house man". One could also check money and valuables with the house, but Willie Moore noted: "That's dangerous. 'Cause he'll put the folks on you — then they split that money."

Any patron who became too belligerent in a barrelhouse, Willie Moore said, was "liable to get killed" by the "house" man, who was typically an intimidating personage. The latter would routinely eject a patron for fighting with another barrelhouser, in which event he would remove the cartridges from the offender's pistol (if he had one) before returning it, or, in some instances, withold the weapon until the following day. This expedient only postponed the killing that was a likely consequence of a serious barrelhouse quarrel, Elizabeth Moore said. "They'd tell you about it, then kill you," she said of belligerent patrons. "Say: 'I'm gonna kill you if it's the last thing I do.' If they didn't kill you tonight, don't worry — they was gonna get you." The frequency of such delivered promises led her to regard the average barrelhouser as "crazy"; her husband said that patrons lacked "the right understandin'." He added: "You take back there, well I say, from 1912 on up...folks kill you: kill another man about a woman."

Troublesome patrons were likely to be permanently banished from a bar-

relhouse, which also ejected extreme drunks. House rules posted near the entrance emphasized decorum: "Like 'No Dozens Played' — cussin', you know," Willie Moore said. "...They didn't 'low none in there, and if they catch you in there playin', why they make you pay a fine." "They" were the police, who would not permit dances that were considered (in Eliabeth's term) "scandalous". Such a dance was "that ol' dance they call the Shimmy-She-Wobble — you know, folks would get way down..." It was not the dance per se, Elizabeth notes, but "the way they was doin' it" that prompted police interference.

"They'd put you out about that Gator," Willie Moore said, referring to a variation of the Shimmy, the Gator Wobble. "...Them gals start them hips rollin', they say: 'Come *out!*'"

Aside from its relative safety, the barrelhouse offered other recreational advantages over the house "frolic" that no doubt contributed to its appeal. Though no less disreputable with church elements, it had pretenses of respectability as the house "frolic" did not. Some Delta barrelhouses made an outright bid for genteel patronage by requiring Sunday dress. At the same time, the barrelhouse offered sexual pleasures that were not found on plantations. The patron had an opportunity to consort with the prostitutes whose pictures were often displayed on its walls. The plantation presented limited opportunities to fraternize with the opposite sex, and the proprietory attitudes of Delta males made it dangerous to tryst on foreign plantations. The male visitor risked a beating and (Moore claimed) even his life by courting on a strange plantation. "They sure will get you now," Willie Moore said, of the male localites. "They catch him over there, that's all she wrote."

Besides women, another special attraction of the barrelhouse was its supply of "sealed whiskey", instead of the crude corn liquor that was house "frolic" fare. The catch-all for any commercial concoction was "bottle in bond", for which the carousing cleric of *Elder Greene* had an unhealthy appetite: "I like to fuss an' fight; Lord an' get sloppy drunk offa bottle in bond..." "That was the whiskey most people, look like, wanted to drink," Booker Miller said of "bottle in bond," which (as "bottled in bond") is technically a distiller's term for hundred proof whiskey aged four years under government supervision. Around the time Patton recorded *Elder Greene* (1929) it went for double the price of corn: "...That moonshine whiskey," Elizabeth Moore said, "you got it for twenty five cents (a half a pint)...What we call 'bond' whiskey, now — sealed whiskey — it's a whole half a pint of it for fifty cents."

In addition to drink, patrons could buy food prepared by the "house" man, whose chief operating expense was liquor. "...They'd have hot fish, any kinda sodawater drink, you know, like Coca-Cola...then they'd have cooked these

here what they call beef stews; they had plenty a-that goin'." Thanks to its provision of food and lodgings, a person could pass an entire week-end in a barrelhouse, which attracted transients by virtue of the absence of hotels that would accomodate blacks.

Barrelhouses must have been plentiful in the turn of the century Delta, for in 1901 a planter complained of the pervasiveness of gambling establishments there:

> It is an entirely conservative statement to say that on or near every Delta plantation may be found one to four regularly patronised crap tables, while in every town and village from one to a half-dozen Negro crap dives are run.[28]

To Willie Moore, the barrelhouse was a place where "folks shoot the craps, dance, and drink whiskey." Although it is conventionally assumed (on no evidence) that blues arose on plantations, the early existence of barrelhouses makes it likely that they were transmitted to plantation musicians, at least in Mississippi, by passing musical tourists. For although turn of the century blues have been reported in New Orleans and St. Louis[29], plantation-born Mississippi guitarists who came of age over the first decade of the century would prove unable to recall blues from the house "frolics" of their youth. Sam Chatmon (b. 1899) said that the Bolton guitarists of his boyhood were largely wedded to *Pearlee* and *My Bucket's Got A Hole In It*: "That's all they knowed back in them days...I ain't never heard nobody pick no blues till my brother Bud and Charlie Patton, they'se about the first..." Skip James (b. 1902) recalled that between 1908-1910 house "frolics" of his native Bentonia were given over to *Alabama Bound, Drunken Spree* (a square dance tune based on "six-two" patterns), and *Slidin' Delta,* a version of *East St. Louis,* all played with violin as lead instrument. "...I hadn't heard of blues then," he noted. "But after a little period of time...I heard my mother and them speak about 'singin' the blues'...I wondered what the blues was then." Richard Harney (the son of a musician who played violin and guitar at "frolics") was weaned on two chord instrumental "breakdown" tunes like *Old Mule.* Of the arrival of blues in his hometown of Marvel, Arkansas, he said: "We'se about eight, nine, ten, somethin' like that...They didn't have no blues 'fore then; nothin' but 'breakdowns'..." The earliest tune Joe Callicott of Nesbit (who was born in 1900, a year before Harney) recollected was likewise a "breakdown", a name that applied to unsyncopated dance tunes that were played chordally, with a chord change at the beginning of each measure. Robert Wilkins (b. 1896) heard only what he called "rag" pieces like *Spoonful* and *Make Me A Pallet On The Floor* (another "six-

two" ditty) as a youth in Hernando. "They started around Hernando about 1904, somethin' like that," he said of the latter tunes, which were featured by Delta migrants at his sister's house "frolics". Willie Moore, who was born in 1898 and raised in Tunica, likewise recalled no blues from his youth. Gus Cannon, who began learning banjo tunes like *Old John Booker* and *Goin' Round The Mountain* in Clarksdale in 1895, could not think of any blues besides *Poor Boy* that were performed by Alec Lee, who would seem not to have been a plantation resident.[30]

What has come to be regarded as a plantation genre simply lacks early plantation credentials.[31] In the face of this fact it would seem that the so-called "country blues" were ruralized blues, early "country blues" being their adaptation as dance music by performers who took their musical cues from barrelhouse transients. Such transients as might have disseminated guitar songs like *Poor Boy* were common in Clarksdale at the turn of the century, and no doubt elsewhere in the Delta; W.C. Handy (who came to Clarksdale in 1903) recalled that hoboing singers

> ...were forever coming and going...Some came sauntering down the railroad tracks, others dropped from freight cars...A favorite hangout with them was the railroad station. There, surrounded by crowds of country folks, they would pour out their hearts in song while the audience ate fish and bread, chewed sugar cane, dipped snuff while waiting for trains to carry them down the line.[32]

Such itinerants were doubtless to be heard in nearby barrelhouses, if their music passed muster with club owners.[33] Of early Delta barrelhouse music nothing is known. Willie Moore recalled that player pianos were to be found in some Delta clubs, so it is likely that ragtime music was popular, as it was in urban barrelhouses. It may have been a shortage of pianists that opened the doors of the barrelhouse to guitarists who were able to collect crowds at railroad depots.

In all probability, Charlie Patton set his early musical sights on the Delta barrelhouse circuit and to that end developed an individualism that was not required of the house "frolic" entertainer, whose audience consisted of neighbors. The lyrics of his songs are saturated with direct and oblique references to barrelhouses, and are preoccupied with the departures that typified the itinerant musician. He makes Albert of *Frankie and Albert* a barrelhouse habitue:

> Well Frankie went down to Albert's house:
> "How late Albert been here?"

> "Oh Albert's sittin' down some cheap gal's lap
> Buyin' some cheap gal beer."

He concludes *Jim Lee* with an address to an abandoned barrelhouse bedmate:

> Where were you, oh mama, when the *Frisco* left the shed?
> "I was way upstairs in my cold iron bed."

Plantation housing consisted of single-story shacks. Patton recollects an unspecifed bit of barrelhouse buffoonery at the end of *Jersey Bull Blues*:

> An' I remember one mornin', 'tween midnight an' day
> I was way upstairs, throwin' myself away.

If Patton originally tailored his music with a view towards promoting himself as a barrelhouse attraction, this circumstance would explain some of its basic departures from run-of-the-mill Mississippi dance music. In the realm of dance accompaniments, Patton's mode of using single string picking to accompany a vocal line (as is done on segments of *Pony* and *Down The Dirt Road*) was exotic even for the 1920s. Skip James recalled that the guitar-playing of his youth consisted of "rapped" (strummed) accompaniments. The house "frolic" serenader had a professional incentive to "rap", for his function was to supply rhythm and volume. To pluck a note diminishes its volume, and Patton was able to compensate for the former disadvantage only by tuning his guitar above concert pitch, which gave his notes a piercing quality, but gave his strings a high mortality rate. According to Booker Miller, he customarily broke a string at every performance, for which reason he traveled with two or three spare sets at his disposal.

Patton's haphazard phrasing patterns bespoke of his indebtedness to street musicians and stamped him as a soloist; invariably, the Mississippi house "frolic" serenader worked in tandem with another musician. The novelty he would bring to such chestnuts as *Spoonful* marked him as a musician in search of wider audiences than the neighbors or near-neighbors who were likely to gravitate to "frolics". Though a performer whose primary outlet was the house "frolic" might be receptive to musical novelty, he had no incentive to initiate it. The barrelhouse entertainer had every incentive to do so: he was in competition with other professionals, and stood to collect tips from appreciative listeners.

In time Patton would prosper as an entertainer as did no other Mississippi bluesman. "I have known him to make as high as forty-five or fifty dollars, and I heard him say one time he made seventy-five dollars for a night's playin'," Booker Miller recalled. He may well have been the first Mississippi bluesman to cultivate a barrelhouse clientele and approach blues-singing with the ambitious eye of a professional. He did not invent blues, but he did invent Charlie Patton, an equally striking invention that was to captivate the Delta as the first person to play blues there did not.

The Delta

"If I could have a wish granted I would like to come back to earth fifty years from now and see this county, and see the changes."—Will Dockery, 1936

Ninety-five miles due north of Edward stands *Dockery's*, the immense Sunflower County plantation on which the Pattons settled after leaving Edwards. As *Dockery's* had been established as the terminus of the "Dog" line's Boyle and Sunflower branch in 1897, the family might simply have made a spur-of-the-moment decision to disembark there while riding a train. On the other hand, they might have been hired by a labor agent representing the plantation before they even left Edwards. In 1886, when the first influx of Hinds County sharecroppers into the Delta had occurred, such agents had already depleted the labor force of the plantations around Edwards to such an extent that the town formed a thirteen-man vigilante committee to combat them. The strong-arm tactics used against labor agents during this period are suggested by a turn of the century newspaper account of a gathering of Hinds County farm owners: "More than one gentleman of the number present promised to 'shoot on the spot' the first man found on his premises to decoy away his labor; while others promised to resort to 'tar and feathers'."[1] Considering the rough reception given the labor agent, the sharecropper probably left the hill farm at some risk, particularly if yellow fever was taking an additional toll of manpower.

But despite the blustering talk against labor agents and legislation that actually penalized both agents and croppers who left plantations without giving notice, the stream of hill migration into the Delta was a perpetual drift during Charlie Patton's lifetime, which roughly coincided with the Delta's rise and decline as a great cotton-producer. Often such emigres were recruited on a temporary basis to pick cotton in the fall and would remain afterwards to crop. Some of the Delta's most effective labor recruiters were said to be its native sharecroppers, who liked to impress their hill counterparts with displays of superior wealth. Since the Delta laborer at the turn of the century could expect fifty or seventy-five cents a day for his efforts, the poverty of the hill resident must have been extreme.

"They used to love to get hill niggers into the Delta," a latter-day Delta planter says of his forebears, "because money was an unknown quantity to them." The lot of the typical emigre who came to the Delta (from the hills and elsewhere) around the time the Pattons did was described by Alfred Stone, who operated a plantation at Dunleith: "The Negroes with whom we started in January of 1899 had absolutely nothing, barring their clothing, bedding, and furniture — all of the scantiest and poorest kind. It would be a most liberal estimate to put their entire belongings at that date at an average value per family of $30. Yet they were an average lot of plantation Negroes..."[2]

With its richer cotton strains, larger tracts of farmland, and soil so rich as to require no fertilization, the turn of the century Delta offered at least the prospect of prosperity to the hill emigre. The contrast between hill and Delta farm wages remained favorable throughout the Twenties, as H. C. Speir recalled: "If he (the hill emigre) made two or two and a half a day, why he'd have to work a whole week out here in the hills to do that..." This contrast also acted as a magnet to pull musicians (whose own fortunes depended on the solvency of their clientele) into the Delta from outlying areas, and Speir could thus vouch for the native origins of almost none of his Delta discoveries. Among the stray bluesmen who passed at least a season working or playing music in the Delta between 1917-1929 were Tommy Johnson, Skip James, Ishmon Bracey, Lonnie Chatmon, Bo Carter, Kokomo Arnold, George (Bullet) Williams, and Booker White.

"...I always did like the Delta, 'cause of the money," said White, a native of Mississippi's northeastern prairie belt who was raised near the Delta town of Brazil. "There was so much money down there: money wasn't no problem." The Delta that White likened to a "money tree" yielded its real fruits during the fall harvest season, as David Edwards attested: "There used to be a lotta money down through that Delta, man, you know when them guys in the fall of the year start pickin' that cotton...They was gettin' three dollars a hundred (pounds of cotton picked) and some of them guys — some of those guys picked four and five hundred a day..."[3] By contrast, the Mississippi hills offered relatively little work for laborers on a day basis. Sam Chatmon recalled: "In the hills you didn't have no work to do at all: if you ain't raised somethin' to get money, you just outta money. Wasn't no work in the day...but now in the Delta, every time you feel up to it you can make a day: they hire you to hoe, plough, just cut, shuck corn, anything you wanted to do, they'd pay you to do it. The man'd pay you off every Saturday: it wasn't much, but if you could get six bits a day, that's better than nothin'."

Some of the perennial planter complaints about the shiftlessness of Mississippi's black laborers were doubtless potentiated by a system that attracted

idlers and drifters with the prospect of temporary work. Even the more durable croppers formed few attachments to the land. "People in the hills always had their own farms," Sam Chatmon said. "But now when you come to the Delta, he (the planter) owned everything." On the average Delta plantation the cropper not only rented his home and land from his boss, but his tools (including mules) as well. Since tenant farmers of every stripe enjoyed no lease on their holdings and worked on seasonal contracts they formed an unstable population group in times of weal or woe. Writing in 1901, Stone noted: "...no planter among us can tell how many or which of his tenants of to-day will be his tenants of another year."[4] In this respect Bill and Annie Patton were an unusual tenant family: they remained on the same plantation until their deaths sometime around the early 1920s, while their children would also spend most of their adult lives there.

They arrived in a Sunflower County that was still relatively unpeopled. Though its black population had doubled between 1890 and 1900, Sunflower County was perhaps the Delta's second most undeveloped region (next to Quitman County) at the turn of the century. It numbered a mere 16,000 residents in 1900, three-quarters of whom were blacks, nearly all tilling on one of the county's 2,700 farms.[5] With soil so lush as to yield one or two bales of cotton per acre in an age when half a bale was considered a good yield, and so fine in sediment that one could drill fifty or sixty feet beneath its topsoil before touching rock, Sunflower County became one of the state's leading cotton-growing regions by the 1920s. Many of the state's largest plantations flourished there. By 1930, when Charlie Patton had become famous throughout the county as a musician, its population had increased fourfold since 1900, with its proportion of blacks remaining roughly the same. They comprised nearly two-thirds the black population then found in such cities as Memphis, St. Louis, and Atlanta. But even then as the Delta's second most populous county (and the third most populous county in the state), Sunflower County lacked a single hamlet to rival Greenwood, Clarksdale, or Greenville, the only three Delta towns with 10,000 people. Only ten of the thirty-odd communities Sunflower County contained in 1930 boasted as many as a hundred residents, and only a single town (the county seat, Indianola, located twenty miles south of *Dockery's*) fell within the contemporary definition of an urban community by attaining a population of 2500. Some four out of every five county residents lived on farms or plantations, and the county's black population contained roughly twice the percentage of ruralites the black race as a whole did. Most of its communities, strung along the Sunflower River and the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley railroad that ran parallel to it, were but plantation satellites.

Although plantation culture was to die out in the Delta, along with the railroad and the riverboat the latter replaced, Sunflower County still retains

much of its cloistered, agricultural character of old. As farmland it is still too fertile to invite industrial development. If the future of the Delta lies in raising food products (as Joe Rice Dockery predicts), today in Sunflower County "one can easily stand in the middle of the Delta's streaming sameness and honestly believe that the world goes straight out forever, flat all the way and overripe, and made by a God who in His infinite wisdom gave Adam a cotton allotment."[6]

The Patton's cotton allotment came from William O. (Will) Dockery (1865-1936), an austere man of Scotch descent and six foot proportions who neither smoked nor drank and wore an unvarying costume consisting of custom-built shoes, a black suit and tie, and a white shirt, even while tending his own commissary. The son of a Confederate colonel who was wounded at Corinth and whose family fortune (built on slavery) was wiped out by the Civil War, Dockery was a throwback to the aggressive Southern pioneers Cash described in his *Mind Of The South.* Upon his graduation from Ole Miss in 1886, he spent two years clerking in his uncle James' store in Memphis before setting out from the family homestead in Hernando on horseback. He had no mission in mind other than to get rich in the Delta and return home. Arriving in Cleveland, some 117 miles south of Memphis, he soon added a wood store he constructed himself to the five or six commissaries and saloons that then comprised the town's commercial life. He found himself in a frontier setting where hundreds of cattle grazed on the cane ridges lining the outskirts of town, and cross ties and pipe staves stood so high along the town's railroad tracks that residents could glimpse only the tops of passing trains. The cultural matrix of the area was Rosedale, a river town thirty miles westward whose latest civic improvement consisted of the laying of two foot planks to serve as sidewalks and which was yet two years away from obtaining outdoor lighting facilities (coal oil lamps slung on wooden posts). Years later, Dockery described the rude character of his surroundings for a local newspaper:

> There was a small amount of cleared land then and it was on the bayous, lakes and rivers. The country was covered with blue cane fifteen to twenty feet high and the land was rich as cream. Woodland was being sold by the Y&MV railroad at $5.00 per acre on long time terms, but it was expensive to clear and lots of people, both white and black would quit after a year or so and sell out for a small equity.
>
> I remember seeing one forty-acres of land being traded for a cow and another forty acres

> traded for a Wincheter rifle. The only land on large plantations was on the Mississippi River front. Rosedale, Miss. was the county seat and hard to get to as there were no roads worth considering...
>
> To get to Rosedale...you spent three days riding in the mud to make the round trip or went to Greenville or Memphis and took the boat. I remember going to Rosedale in a tall two-wheeled cart with a single horse by way of Merigold. My wheels got stuck and I had to pull the cart out in the cane, and hang the harness in a tree and lead the horse for several miles...[7]

Indeed the Delta as such did not properly exist when Dockery sought his fortune there: it was popularly known as "the Swamp". Even within Charlie Patton's adult memory of it the Delta was not a flat farmland but a swampy timberland, described in 1902 by an engineer who constructed part of the *Dog* as "a dense wilderness of oak, cypress, elm, ash, hickory..."[8] Faulkner portrayed the Delta as it existed in 1908 as "the vast flat alluvial swamp of cypress and gum and brake and thickets lurked with bear and deer and panthers and snakes, out of which man was still hewing savagely and violently the rich ragged fields in which cotton stalks grew ranker and taller than a man on a horse..."[9] To this assortment of fauna he might have added the wild turkey, the wildcat, the wolf, and the mosquito, the most deadly and prevalent form of Delta wildlife.

Originally the Delta was valued as a source of white oak rather than as farmland. Its growth as a lumbering center dated to 1879, when a group of Midwestern millmen, faced with the rapid depletion of Michigan and Wisconsin hardwoods, decided to relocate in Memphis and log from northern Mississippi. Subsequently, lumbering became the Delta's only sustantial industry, to decline in the Twenties. (Only occasional clusters of trees, usually running along the rivers or used as property-markers, now relieve the Delta landscape.) Until the arrival of railroads, however, neither lumbering nor farming could gain a real foothold in the Delta: as a turn of the century observer wrote of the region: "In the rainy season the wagon roads are well night impassable, and a long high haul by wagon through the alluvial mud of this country is, and will continue to be, out of the question."[10] The town of Cleveland was itself a stepchild of the railroad, owing its existence to the fact that a team of railroaders who were laying track from Memphis for the Louisiana, New Orleans and Texas line happened to meet the team pushing northwards from Vicksburg in that area during the latter part of 1884. A wood depot originally commemorated this

juncture. Then the railroad (which had purchased the adjoining land from the newly-formed state levee board at eleven cents an acre) began selling lots to private investors, one of whom decided to name the embroyonic town in honor the nation's first Democratic president since the Civil War. Another legacy of the railroad was the all-black town of Mound Bayou, which consisted of thirty or forty thousand acres of plantation land above Cleveland and was established with railway land purchased in 1887 by a former slave of Jefferson Davis.

Eight miles to the east of the rail line on which Mound Bayou had been built lay the Sunflower River, accessible only by riverboat. A local prophet told Dockery in 1888 that within a decade the river, then obscured by thick foliage, would be visible from Cleveland. In two years time a temporary track to the river had been laid by Cleveland lumber interests, who began exploiting the area for its red gum, sweet gum, and cottonwood trees (a species that grew forty or sixty feet high, and soon became virtually extinct in Sunflower County). As such developments proceeded land fever began to quicken the pulse of local settlers, pauper and plutocrat alike. Among its victims was a black Bolivar County resident, Joe Ousley, whose brother served as the county's circuit clerk. Working on a shoestring (he often had to use Dockery as collateral on $2.50 loans), he founded the all-black town of Renova three miles above Cleveland; it never succeeded in rivaling Mound Bayou. The same fever gripped Dockery himself, who similarly lacked capital but could parlay credit from his Memphis uncle into land mortgages. In 1890 he began leasing a 790 acre plantation, only to see cotton prices plummet during the next four years. In 1895, the first year that Sunflower County land had appreciable value, he founded his own plantation, choosing a site on the Sunflower River five miles southeast of Cleveland.

The plantation, which he simply named *Dockery's*[11], consisted of nearly ten thousand acres which he drained and cleared himself, and acquired for something around five dollars an acre.[12] He lived to see his land attain a value of three hundred dollars an acre, making him a millionaire several times over. To the end of his life, however, he remained a basically unsnobbish man of rustic pleasures (fishing, hunting, and horseback riding). Finding the title "planter" too pompous for his tastes, he labeled himself a "merchant and farmer" on his own business stationery. The kind of status rivalry that led other Delta planters to enshrine themselves in Southern *Who's Who* books interested him not. Yet by virtue of sheer wealth, Dockery was among the cream of the Delta's aristocracy, which was founded on property rather than ancestry. Like most wealthy planters, he took the route of absentee ownership as soon as he could afford it. Deeming the Delta climate too unhealthy for living souls, he presided over his holdings from Memphis.[13]

The scourge of the early Delta was malaria, a disease that had helped retard its development until the late nineteenth century and had given the Delta the nickname "The Death House" in the Mississippi hills. Dread of malaria also hampered efforts to recruit native white labor. As a result, most of the brute work by which the Delta was transformed from a canebrake swamp to an inhabitable territory was performed by foreign or nonwhite groups who shared but little in its spoils. One of the first such groups were Chinese immigrants who came to the Delta in 1879 (shortly before the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act) to work on the railroad; for a brief spell, they were seen as a means of reviving the plantation system which was thought to have been ruined by Reconstruction. Though they numbered but 360 souls across the state in 1920, the Chinese (who often intermarried with blacks) were a familar sight around Cleveland, where a Chinese mission school was located. Irish immigrants had constructed the upper Delta's first rude levees in 1884-1885, and the Delta's early plantations were typically cropped not only by blacks but by Italian and Mexican immigrants as well. In Bolivar County Mexicans remained so numerous that a planter who arrived there in 1912 (Matt Dakin) found it necessary to learn Spanish to conduct his affairs. The Italians had arrived in the Delta by way of New York and Argentina in the late nineteenth century; like the Chinese they could not adapt to the plantation system but maintained their own presence, and their alien social status. The brunt of the Delta's plantation posts fell to blacks, who outnumbered Delta whites by as much as eight to one at the turn of the century. "A special advantage in having plenty of negro labor," confides Darling, who used blacks as axemen and chainmen while surveying for the *Dog*, "is the fact that the negro is more easily provided for, and less liable to sickness from hardships and the unhealthy climate than the white man." The 1892 edition of *Chambers' Encyclopedia* was even more explicit on this point: it claimed that blacks were more resistant to malaria, yellow fever, and even sunstroke than the Southern white. But more important than black durability in the minds of most plantation employers was the question of docility. As a turn of the century observer noted: "...the negro is preferred to the native or foreign white hand by a large number of the Southern landowners, especially by those engaged in raising cotton. This class declares that he gives less trouble than a white man because he is content with less comfortable lodgings, with coarser food, and with smaller wages."[14]

The most pitiless planter nevertheless had to make some sort of provisions for his workers. Like many early planters, Dockery was faced with the necessity of establishing his plantation as a self-sufficient community, for his property was isolated from any area of commerce. It was not directly connected to Cleveland by rail, and the settlement that was to be its nearest western neighbor,

Ruleville, was not created until 1898.[15] Thus when the *Encyclopedia of Mississippi History* was published in 1906, *Dockery's* was classified as a hamlet, and is even now so treated on some contemporary maps. Save for the fact that it was a private estate, and thus had no system of government, *Dockery's* had virtually all the community elements of a small Mississippi town. During its first fifty years of existence it maintained a government post office and minted tokens and paper scrip which served as a medium of exchange at the plantation's brick commissary (and later, in Ruleville stores as well).[16] The commissary once staffed six full-time employees and dispensed supplies on a monthly basis to tenants who came there from every end of the plantation (and sometimes from other plantations) in wagons. A sawmill and blacksmith's works also stood on the premises. Two churches, Baptist and Methodist (called *St. John* and *True Light*), and two elementary schools, both running to the eighth grade (and neither, in the opinion of Dockery's son, very adequate), ministered to the spiritual and educational upbringing of local residents. In death the *Dockery's* cropper became its perpetual tenant, reposing in the plantation cemetery (*True Light*), which now harbors the remains of Patton's parents, his younger brother C., and his sister Viola.

Unlike some planters, whose idea of providing for the welfare of their tenants began and ended at the commissary counter, Dockery seems to have been moved by a genuine spirit of paternalism. Upon his discovery that town practioners were bilking his tenants, he hired a white physician to live on his property; the physician treated patients of either race. To wean his tenants from a usurious undertaker, he organized a non-profit burial association and offered the facilities of the plantation cemetery to anyone who had ever been a *Dockery's* tenant. More idealistic reforms, such as the renovation of living quarters, were attempted but abandoned in the belief that tenants abused them. Dockery's sense of *noblesse oblige* is indicated by his close friendship with Leroy Percy, the one-time Mississippi Senator who owned a three thousand acre plantation near Greenville and was the South's most outspoken foe of the Ku Klux Klan. Of the Percys it has been written: "...this family has embodied all of the qualities thought desirable by aristocrats and would-be aristocrats. Bound by a tradition of honor, of dignity, of fair-dealing, the family has typified the best of the old Southern aristocracy."[17] Of Dockery it was once written (in a Mississippi newspaper) that he was the Delta's greatest philanthropist.

The charity for which the genteel breed of planter was noted was selectively applied to favored tenants and did not translate into the general welfare of the cropper. For the most part the Delta planter was pragmatic towards his labor force, dealing with it in strictly business-like fashion. In some respects this lack of emotionalism shielded Delta blacks from the kind of racial onslaughts

that erupted in cities like Memphis, where a white man entered a black saloon in 1908 and randomly shot six patrons to death without suffering legal consequences. As Joe Dockery remarks, Delta planters considered the killing of blacks a needless waste of labor. As a breed they had little use for the rabid lynch rhetoric of James Vardaman, the turn of the century redneck governor who ousted Percy from the Senate and was given to statements like: "If it is necessary, every Negro in the state will be lynched: it will be done to maintain white supremacy..." Rather than exterminate, the planter manipulated, confident of his ability to handle a tenant he considered a child, or, as Percy's son William Alexander put it: "a younger brother...tragic, pitiful, and lovable..."[19] Like the black croppers he hired, he made a distinction between the "good" and "bad" Negro, according to his submissiveness, productivity, and conformity with prevailing moral standards.

That Charlie Patton was disreputable from Dockery's standpoint is seen by the latter's attitude towards music: he regarded it as frivolous and even frowned on his son's desire to take piano lessons. No doubt by design, his plantation had no jukehouse. The *Dockery's* resident who sought headier amusements than were afforded by local house "frolics" or the plantation's baseball team had to hunt elsewhere for them. He could leave the plantation easily enough to do so, via Kimball's Ferry (named for a local lake) which provided transportation across the Sunflower River, or a fifty mile stretch of dirt road that ran through the plantation, ultimately linking Clarksdale with Indianola. Or, he could await the daily arrival of a *Dog* local called the *Pea Vine* at the plantation's two-story depot, which had its own station master. The train, which Patton used as the subject of a blues song, hauled both passengers and Dockery's cotton harvest, replacing the steamboats that had previously plied the Sunflower River for the same purpose. It originally made but three stops and traveled but fifteen miles, from Skene to Boyle to *Dockery's*.

In all, some four hundred tenant families, each farming as much as eighty acres, comprised *Dockery's* work force in its heyday. By the 1960s, when Charlie Patton's origins first interested blues researchers, only a handful of tenants remained on the plantation. The story of *Dockery's* decline as a tenant farm is a familiar one: beginning in the Depression, when cotton prices fell to five cents a pound, the plantation received Federal subsidies under the Agricultural Adjustment Administration for instituting acreage cutbacks. The need for hand labor was then further reduced by the introduction of tractors, mechanical harvesters, and mechanical pickers. (Some of the first tractors deployed in the Delta were tested experimentally on *Dockery's* by the firm of McCormack International.) Since 1950 the plantation's chief crop has been rice, a product Dockery's son Joseph would promote on behalf of the National Rice Council of

America. When interviewed in 1970, he had few regrets about the passing of the plantation and no memory whatsoever of the Patton family, though it was among *Dockery's* most tenacious settlers.

The Pattons lived on the Lost Lake section of the plantation near Parchman, which was a tiny village of twenty-three persons when the family arrived in the Delta. The little we know of Bill Patton suggests that he was an industrious tenant. "He hung around home, he didn't go to no 'suppers' and be rowdy like that," reported his one-time neighbor, Sara Garrett. At the same time, she scoffed at the statement (advanced by Charlie's sister) that Bill was a church elder. "He wasn't so much a churchin' man," she laughed, "...he wasn't near about no preacher."

The household he headed consisted of at least seven members, including his brother-in-law Sherman Martin: "Charlie's father had a *heap* of people stayin' with him," Sara remembered. From Will Dockery's standpoint, this was an asset; as his son says: "The bigger the family, the more desirable they were as tenants." The size of the family would have also made it easier for Charlie to minimize his own contributions to his father's crop, for the assistant manager who was charged with exacting work from tenants measured their productivity in terms of families rather than their individual members.

Dockery's operated along the conventional lines of sharecropping that had become universal on Mississippi plantations by 1890, in which the landlord took half the tenant's crop in exchange for providing him with land, housing, and farm equipment, and deducted advances against living expenses and costs attendant to picking and ginning his cotton. A day laborer could earn a dollar or $1.20 per day there in the 1920s, as opposed to the fifty or sixty cents he might expect for performing similar work in the hill country. Joe Dockery states that the total wages paid out by the plantation ran to some $20,000 annually in the 1920s, and that a family could easily clear two or three thousand dollars for their efforts in one season. This figure so far exceeds the kind of income associated with sharecropping that it can only be entertained on the grounds that *Dockery's* tenants worked far larger land tracts than the fifteen or twenty acres tilled by the average Delta tenant family. It would certainly have made *Dockery's* among the most lucrative plantations for tenants, and hence blues guitarists, to work. "They got a fair deal," Dockery says of his father's tenants. "We didn't rob 'em blind like some of them did...I'm not saying that we didn't follow the system—if you tried to buck the system in those days you woulda been put outta business."

Although this system was feudal in character the Delta was commonly regarded as a land of golden opportunity for both races during Patton's boyhood. Not all of its blacks were tillers of the soil; the scarcity of whites mandated their use in more prestigious positions. Writing in 1906, Alfred Stone remarks:

> Throughout the Delta there are Negroes filling places of responsibility and trust. In the country the gin crews and engineers are practically all Negroes, and there are Negro foremen, agents, and sub-managers. There are many constables, and there is in my county a Negro justice of the peace. In my own town every mail carrier is a Negro and we have a Negro on the police force. Some are employed by cotton factors and buyers, and earn from $600 to $1,000 per annum...One cannot travel through this section without observing Negro landowners everywhere.[20]

The black success stories Patton could not have failed to witness during his adolescence may not have converted him to the work ethic, but they must have brought home the idea that musicians were hardly the glory of their race, at least in the eyes of most of his neighbors. He was certainly aware of the black aristocracy at Mound Bayou, whose chief financier, Charles Banks, was known as the "J. Pierpoint Morgan of his race". On his own plantation Patton had the worthy example of Lee Frederick, a tenant who amassed $100,000 over fifteen years by helping Dockery develop Lost Lake. His family would have sometimes worked under black straw bosses and taken their cotton to black weighing agents. In 1908 Patton would have heard much discussion of Booker T. Washington, who came to Mississippi at Banks' behest and visited Mound Bayou in a special Pullman car provided by the Illinois Central. After his departure, a Mississippi newspaper editorialized: "No more popular man ever came to the State, and no man ever spoke to larger audiences than he did."[21]

At the same time, Patton would always know that a deadly fate remained in store for the black who did not toe the line as it was drawn by his white masters. During his teenage years Sunflower County compiled an unenviable record of terrorism against blacks. In January of 1903 the post office of Indianola was closed by Theodore Roosevelt in response to harrassment of its black post-mistress. That year lynchings occurred at Drew and Cleveland. In February of 1904 (the year Jim Crow officially came to Mississippi) three blacks were lynched and two others burned alive near Doddsville in reprisal for the killing of planter James Eastland. Six weeks later there were two more lynchings at Cleveland. Although the Sunflower-Bolivar County regions never again reached this early height of violence, a sociologist could still describe Delta lynching, nine years after Patton's death, as "...part of the culture pattern...When the white community quiets down, the Negroes go about their usual occupations. The incident is not forgotten, but the routine of the plantation goes on. The lynching, in fact, is part of the routine."[22]

During Patton's lifetime the ordeals of the Southern black were not an occasion of national concern or popular sympathy. Speaking before the Repub-

lican Club of New York in 1905, President Roosevelt would declare: "Laziness and shiftlessness, these, and above all, vice and criminality, of every kind, are evils more potent for harm to the black race than all acts of oppression of white men put together." The Delta chiefly interested him as a magnificant hunting ground, where he could enjoy himself in the rough-and-tumble company of planters like General Wade Hampton of Greenville, whom Roosevelt admired for taking part in the destruction of five hundred black bears, "at least two thirds of them," he wrote enthusiastically, "falling by his own hand."

Lacking influential spokesmen or elementary civil rights, the Southern black had to evolve his own defense against possible extinction. The survival tactic of resignation was a lesson every black child of Patton's generation learned from his parents. Sam Chatmon cited his father's counsel: "He always told me when a person got a rope around your neck, if you rare back it'll choke. Just stand still. And what he meant by that: don't argue...If you get in a trap, it's no need of rarin' if you ain't got a loose hand where you can mash the trap to get out; you just have to sit there till the fella let you out."

Charlie Patton was similarly compliant, at least outwardly so. "He was the sort of guy looked like he could 'take' with the boss," David Edwards said of him. "He could talk with 'im, 'Uncle Tom' with 'im..." Booker Miller observed that Patton shunned "trouble" with whites, but "didn't act like he was 'scarey' (fearful of them)."

As a professional musician Patton doubtless welcomed white patronage, though his ability to attract it was derided by Sam Chatmon, who played bass viol in a family string band that catered entirely to whites: "Charlie Patton picked and picked and picked, but he never could be able to play for dances unless it was colored folks. He couldn't play no fast music. White folks wanted the One Step, Foxtrot, and waltz: he couldn't play that. That left him out." However, Chatmon did not know Patton in the Delta, where whites, Booker Miller noted, "wanna dance on everything you play."

Though Chatmon held otherwise, Patton could play fast music in a way that whites no doubt savored, and his uptempo One Step *Shake It And Break It* seems to have been tailor-made for white presentation. "That came outta Memphis," Joe Rice Dockery said of the song, a six bar ditty (featuring four bar verses and a two bar chorus). "I was raised with that." Save for its skillful guitar picking, Patton's recording lacks a single suggestion of black origins: its phrases are cut in single measures, its vocal melody gives prominence to a major seventh (an interval never heard in blues song), its accompaniment is played chordally, with no attempt to embellish tones by "bending", and its rhythm accents the first beat of every measure, a conventional pattern Patton never used on any other recorded tune. Despite its removal from Patton's

recorded metier, it was once pivotal to his repertoire: when Willie Moore met him sometime before 1919, it loomed as "the biggest thing I heard him play," along with another ditty, *It Ain't Gonna Rain No More.* The latter piece became a 1923 pop hit for Wendall Hall and was probably of white origin.[23] Patton's version contained the lines:

> What did the blackbird say to the crow?
> Said: "It rained last night an' the night before,
> But it ain't gonna rain no mo'."

Another Patton favorite of probable white derivation was *Caledonia, The Gal I Love.* "He sure played it!" Moore said.

As Patton's recordings were designed for black audiences they contained only isolated samples of his white-oriented material. His eight bar ditty *Some Of These Days* (which may have been a take-off on Sophie Tucker's famous 1910 hit) was likely conceived for white presentation: it used diatonic intervals and featured the keynote as its lowest vocal tone, a technique Patton usually avoided in singing blues and gospel material. Its rhythm pattern emphasized the second beat of each measure, instead of the 1-2-3-4 pattern Patton favored in blues. The intricate picking and strumming Patton used in executing both this work and *Shake It And Break It* indicates that he attempted at some point in his career to make a lasting impression on white audiences with his musicianship, perhaps in the capacity of a medicine show entertainer. It is likely that when he played for white square dances and "sociables" he strummed behind a fiddler and sang tunes in the vein of *Runnin' Wild,* another eight bar diatonic ditty which repeated the accenting pattern of *Some Of These Days* and likewise deployed the keynote as its lowest vocal tone. Given a fiddler to play lead, Patton could no doubt reel off such tunes indefinitely. Yet it is significant that in singing *Runnin' Wild, Some Of These Days,* and *Shake It And Break It,* Patton had a short supply of verses, and sang inordinate repeats of the title verse or chorus. It may thus be that when he came to record in 1929 his days as an entertainer at white functions were well behind him. Booker Miller recounted his attitude towards white audiences: "He said they would pay more than colored people, and more easier, but he would rather play for colored people. Which I reckon he was right about, 'cause I played for whites, too, but I just woulda hadda sit there...You couldn't 'let go', you know: wasn't nothin' to do but play."

While Patton's blues were obviously created for black consumption, his lyrics could often be enjoyed by either race, and it is probably no accident that he should sing not only of the riverboats and railroads that were part of the

Delta's general lore but would single out a white train engineer and white policemen by name in three separate songs. An apparent arrest for drunkeness led him to concoct a sedate blues that smacks of an attempt to curry favor with the recently-installed high sheriff of Merigold, O.T. Rushing, who had assumed office in 1928 and would hold that position for the next four years:

> Laid down last night, hopin' I would have my peace
> But when I woke up, Tom Rushin' was shakin' me.

Patton's Merigold crony Willie (Have Mercy) Young recalled Rushing as a "right young law" who "wasn't about twenty five years old" when Patton recorded the song (misconstrued by Paramount as *Tom Rushen*) in 1929. Like his brother, who worked as the book-keeper of *Dockery's* plantation, he was renowned for his athletic prowess, which he turned to good account on his job. "He was a law who wouldn't shoot you for nothin'," Young said appreciatively. "...I don't care what you done: if you outrun him, he let you go." As a new arrival in Merigold, Young tried to pit his legs against those of the towering Rushing (whom he took to be seven feet tall) after breaking a bowl upon a girlfriend's head during a house "frolic" fracas: "He caught me: 'Fella, don't you know your legs aren't fast?' I said: 'I just didn't know the town! But if I hadda knew the town you never woulda got me.' I had three blocks on him...I said: 'What's the fine?' He said: 'Five dollars, and go about your business.'" Patton's song likewise pointed up the futility of flight from the fleet Rushing:

> When you get in trouble, it's no use go screamin'
> an' cryin'
> Tom Rushin' will take you, back to the prisonhouse
> flyin'.

Instead of elaborating on his own confinement, Patton devoted three couplets to the doings of Rushing's deputy, a man named Days, who had arrested one of his friends for bootlegging and apparently aspired to become sheriff:

> It was late one night, Halloway was gone to bed
> Mr. Day brought whiskey taken from under Halloway's head.
>
> ...I got up this mornin', Tom Day was standin' around
> If he lose his office here he's runnin' from town to town.

Of Days, Young said: "Mister Day was all right, but he wasn't like Tom Rushin'. Mister Rushin' was my man."

Patton's most famous song, *Pony Blues*, could obviously be appreciated by either race, for it played upon sheer Americana:

> Hitch up my pony, saddle up my black mare...

The Lynds noted: "In 1890 the possession of a pony was the wildest flight of a Middletown boy's dreams." In 1909, when Patton's song was likely to have been new, some two million horse-drawn carriages (as opposed to eighty thousand automobiles) were manufactured in America. In the following year a Harvard historian who had recently returned from the Delta wrote of Southern blacks: "...they are fond of going about the country, and you see them everywhere, on horseback, or in little bull carts, or on foot."[25] According to Sam Chatmon, sharecroppers could not afford riding horses: they made do with mules, or yearling bulls. The saddle horse was the plaything of the planter, and one of Dockery's proudest possessions was a saddle mare named Alissa Gray for which he had traded almost two hundred acres of land. When Patton sang of owning a saddle mare he must have brought a smile to Dockery's face, for the luxury it represented lay quite beyond a black tenant.

Whatever Patton may have thought of the social conditions that made for such disparity, he was not about to inject a note of criticism or disgruntlement in his blues. Delta whites were quick to pick up on the imagined social overtones of black songs, to the point of discerning revolution in phrases that were sung quite innocently. "In World War One, they sung a song, 'Oh Lord, won't you stop by here?'" Willie Moore recalled. "These white folks was *killin'* folks about that."[26] Moore himself was once jailed in Robinsonville for an indiscreet song reference to a local sheriff, and opined that Patton was "too smart" to have landed himself in similar trouble with a song. If it ever occurred to Patton or his associates to address themselves to such subjects as lynchings, these thoughts were automatically suppressed. "No sir, they wouldn't bring them *up*," said the former jukehouse owner, Elizabeth Moore. "I ain't jokin'! They was scared: they wasn't *gonna* bring it up."

While racial turmoil left no visible mark on Mississippi blues, the plantation system itself inadvertently fostered the growth of guitar-playing as a diversion, for it left tenants with a good deal of idle time on their hands. To David Edwards this fact alone explained the preponderance of Delta musicians: "Mississippi and Arkansas furnished the largest group of musicians," he said categorically, "'cause they didn't have nothin' to do but sit on a stump and sit around and play and drink that 'white whiskey'." It is certainly true that the Delta share-

cropper faced a leisure time problem that is even yet unknown to modern workers, but lacked the recreational means available to less rural or more prosperous groups. Besides the four or five month layoff that ensued between the end of each ginning season (usually in October or November) and the onset of the March planting season, they faced shorter layoffs between the planting, chopping, and picking cycles of cotton-growing. Even during the "busy" picking season that began in August they did not work continuously: one study estimates that adverse weather and other factors produced a fifteen day work month.[27] Joe Dockery holds that his father's hands were employed for fewer than the one hundred and fifty days William Alexander Percy cited as the maximum work year on his Greenville plantation.

The vast boredom that this sluggish labor system could only have engendered was no doubt partly responsible for the large numbers of black Mississippians who took up guitar without any express intention of making a career of music, in the face of church proscriptions of secular singing. To this nurturing condition the Delta added another incentive that gave license to the professional blues career. The Delta planter's *laissez-faire* attitude towards the mores and leisure activities of his tenants sanctioned the unrestrained carousing that was the purpose of the barrelhouse and house "frolic". As Joe Dockery put it: "It was just kinda understood that Saturday night belonged to *them.*" This hands-off approach as a direct carry-over of the Mississippi slaver's attitude, which was marked by indifference to the nature of slave amusements, "so long as they did not affect his working ability."[28]

It was an article of planter faith that the Delta tended to breed the kind of black who had a lust for barrelhousing. "The hill people weren't your Saturday night, skin-balling, crap-shooting nigger," one Delta planter recalls. "They'd come to the Delta and pick up bad habits."[29]

Among the "bad habits" blacks were said to acquire in the Delta was promiscuity. The hills, with their smaller plantations or family farm units that were usually staggered a mile or more apart, presented little opportunity for casual fornication. "Up in the Delta," Sam Chatmon noted, "shucks, houses, just all up on one another." Many Delta plantations, including *Dockery's*, put a premium on female labor as a means of attracting male tenants.

As on other such plantations, the sexual behavior of *Dockery's* tenants was considered slack by its white residents, one of whom would characterize the plantation's bygone female tenants as "whores".[30] Therein no doubt lay the roots of Patton's random womanizing.

To Hayes McMullen, Patton appeared "woman crazy", more so than any male he ever met. In addition to numberless girl friends, he accumulated fourteen known "wives", nearly all of them beneficiaries (or casualties) of

episodic common-law attachments that were likely to end as soon as someone else caught his fancy. "Heap of time you'd mostly meet him he'd have a different wife," his nephew Tom Cannon reported. "He'd just put one down, and pick another one out...He could play good music and everything, and they'd fall for him."

Son House said: "Charlie, he didn't stay with no woman too long...He'd always do most of the quittin'." House attributed Patton's mobility to lack of respect for his companions: "He just figured that there ain't n'ar a one pays him no attention no how...They don't 'mount to all that much for him to keep interested in." Patton voiced this attitude in one couplet:

> Gonna show you common women how I feel
> Gonna get me 'nother woman, 'fore I leave.
> (*Going To Move To Alabama*)

Perhaps the kind of women that Patton (as a rootless person) was likely to attract were the type he derided as "common". His own songs demonstrate little affection for women, and his appreciation of them was avowedly sensual rather than sentimental:

> I love my baby an' I
> "Tell the world I do!"
> What made me love her, you will come an' love her, too.
> (*When Your Way Gets Dark*)

He advertised his distaste for marriage in the closing couplet of *Pony Blues*:

> I got somethin' to tell you, when I get a chance:
> I don't wanna marry, just wanna be your man.

He told Son House that save for a single exception, he took no legitimate wives, but married figuratively by "jumping over the broomstick," a colloquial phrase for cohabitation uttered (according to Partridge) "in reference to the pretence-marriage ceremony performed by both parties jumping over a stick."[31]

Before Patton was out of his teens he had already collected at least four "wives". Of the first, a lady named Gertrude, nothing is known. Between 1904 and 1908 he became involved with a native of Stringtown named Lizzie Taylor (1887-1966). "...She was around seventeen, and he was too, when they met one another," her one-time neighbor, Flora Kimble of Sumner, recalled. For

several years they intermittently lived together in Yalobusha County, a hill region east of the Delta. "...They separate and go back, separate and go back, and eventually, the last time, well, he didn't," Miss Kimble explained.

The portrait Patton sat for sometime during the course of this involvement is one of his two remaining likenesses, and shows a more youthful and vigorous-looking figure than the emaciated Patton projected by a Paramount publicity photo taken two or three decades later. Its existence was called to light by Willie Moore, who had recognized it as Patton's likeness while visiting Lizzie Taylor on the *Mitchener* plantation near Sumner in the early 1960s. "I said: 'Look!' I said: 'Miss, where you got that picture from?'" Moore recalled.

"She said: 'That's my husband!'

"I said: 'No! You don't know what you're talkin' about, do you?'

"She said: 'Yeah, I do.' She said: 'What's his name?'

"I said: 'Charlie Patton.'"

Apparently she had kept the picture as a romantic keepsake. "She really loved him," remarked Flora Kimble, who acquired it upon her death. "She said she never would get over him. She says that's the onliest man she ever loved. She told everybody that. That was her whole talk, all the time."

Patton's cavalier attitude towards women may have extended to Lizzie Taylor, but it was not an attribute of his pre-blues singing days. It was a woman, he told Booker Miller, who was responsible for his becoming a blues musician.

The Greening Of The Delta Blues

"That man was some box-player, man."
—Booker Miller

Although Charlie Patton's sister once told her son that he learned guitar as a ten or eleven year old and "come up playin'," Patton himself told his protege Booker Miller that he began to play guitar around the age nineteen or twenty. Assuming that he reckoned his birth year as falling between 1887 and 1890, this account would firmly place the beginning of his career sometime between 1906 and 1909, when he had spent at least five years in the Delta. The earlier playing date is preferable, since he was already a musician when he met Millie Barnes in 1908.

"He told me how he got started," Miller related. "Said he sit up all night...on a door step. He was havin' women-troubles then...so he borrowed a guitar. He got as far as his steps, and he sat there all night, and he did learn to tune and kinda learn to play a little bit in that period of time. And after that, then he say he just kept on advancin'...till he finally learned. It finally got into his blood."

The incident that prompted Patton to take up guitar apparently involved the loss of a girl-friend or wife. Paradoxically, the neophyte who would turn to guitar to express or escape romantic turmoil would find women a replacable commodity, thanks to his success as a blues singer:

> If you don't want me, you oughta been told me so
> For I'll get me a woman, most anyplace I go.
> (*Jim Lee Blues*: *Part Two: 1929*)

But perhaps the impetus for Patton's earliest musical experiment was not so much dejection as a desire to impress Roxie Gibson, a dark, heavy-set woman he had met around Lula (where Will Dockery owned a plantation) several years before he began living with Millie Barnes in 1908. "He was with her quite a while," his nephew Tom Cannon reported. "He kept Roxie longer than he did any woman." (In terms of duration this would mean over four years, the length of his attachment to Bertha Lee Jones.) Roxie herself was a banjoist, the only one of Patton's assorted "wives" who played a musical instrument.

On his porch step Patton wrestled with the tune he represented to Booker Miller as his original guitar effort: *If You Take My Woman, I Won't Get Mad With You.* "Now he could play that *good,*" Miller said of Patton's rendition. Miller's recreation of it in "Spanish" (open A tuning) represented a complete departure from any accompaniment Patton recorded. It was instrumentally identical with Furry Lewis' *I Will Turn Your Money Green* (1928), a common blues motif that both Hayes McMullen and Joe Callicot (both Mississippi hill country musicians, unlike the Memphis-based Lewis) played. The vocal melody of the song had even wider circulation: it was first recorded in 1924 by Georgia's Reese DuPree as part of *Norfolk Blues.* In its original form, *If You Take My Woman* may not have been a guitar piece at all: its basic melodic line occurs in Jaybird Coleman's harmonica piece, *Trunk Busted - Suitcase Fulla Holes* (1927), as well as in fiddle-guitar duets like Andrew and Jim Baxter's *Bamalong Blues* (1927), the Alabama Sheiks' *Travelin' Railroad Man Blues* (1931), and Henry Sims' *Come Back Corrina,* which featured Patton's unmelodic backing guitar. Considering the diverse origins of these musicians (Coleman hailed from Bessemer, Alabama and the Baxter brothers from Calhoun, Georgia), the tune would appear to have rivaled *East St. Louis Blues* as a nearly universal blues standard.

The melody associated with *If You Take My Woman* was phrased like a blues, but did not employ characteristic blues intervals. Instead of ending the first vocal phrase on the keynote, it featured a descending cadence from the dominant to the subdominant to the mediant (major third).[2] The artless uptempo version recorded by Lewis was no doubt current when Patton learned it, and affords a valuable glimpse of early Mississippi blues-playing. Lewis' stanzas employed ten beat vocal lines in an ABC melodic pattern; the six note melody involved the first five degrees of the major diatonic scale, with the fleeting addition of minor thirds. The instrumental phrasing of *Turn Your Money Green* was haphazard and jerky in the style of street songs. The first vocal phrase was followed by two identical instrumental measures. While the last beat of each measure was a silent rest (a feature alien to dance accompaniments), the first three beats of the measure mimicked the melody and rhythm of the descending vocal cadence with three single string bass notes. Crude open string tonic strums set off the subsequent pair of vocal phrases; ordinarily, two measures of such strumming followed the second phrase and three measures followed the third, resulting in fourteen bar stanzas. The skeletal acccompaniment of the vocal part had a sing-song quality by virtue of its repetitive accenting pattern: an accented fretted bass note fell on the first beat of the first two measures of each phrase.

Patton's flair as an arranger was demonstrated by his artful conversion of

this pedestrian material into a dance piece with a supple beat, *Green River Blues*. Green River lay off Lake Cormorant, Mississippi, and was the site of a lumber mill founded in 1907 that bore the name of the stream; Patton's song failed to indicate which of the two Green Rivers it invoked. If its thricefold repetition of the title lyric ("I went up Green River, rollin' like a log") gave the song an obsolete cast when he recorded it in 1929[3], there was nothing outmoded or backward in Patton's arrangement, which he played in the E position (capoed to G, the pitch of Lewis' version) and for the most part rendered in thirteen and a half bar stanzas. Working within the scheme of the its predecessor, Patton produced a song so novel that its roots were almost unrecognizable. Though he left the basic melody of the first two phrases and ABC melodic pattern of the song intact, he restructured the third phrase and gave the vocal a distinctive sound by adding augmented fourths and minor sevenths. Single measure instrumental riffs followed each vocal phrase, as in *If You Take My Woman - Turn Your Money Green*; Patton's fills, however, were more percussive and contained tonal nuances that were inaccessible to most guitarists. His guitar accompaniment had a real texture, which was absent from its gauche forerunner, and his more expressive singing used dynamic contrasts (such as a diminished volume in the third line) that played no part in Lewis' humdrum delivery.

While Patton typically held the last word of each phrase (which began on the tenth beat) for three beats, he kept the underlying ten beat vocal idea of the original intact by beginning his guitar riffs on the eleventh beat of each phrase. His basic ten beat vocal phrasing unit fused two distinct phrase snippets. The first two lines of each stanza were made up of five beat clusters:

Beats 1-5	*Beats 6-10*
Up Green River	*rollin' like a log*
Thought I heard that	*Marion whistle blow*
It was late last night	*every thing was still*
How long	*evenin' train been gone?*

These phrases had a simple melodic symmetry that was basically foreign to blues: the fifth and tenth beats of the first line were sung as major thirds, while the same beats of the second line bore the keynote.

Patton's guitar work offset the ditty-like quality of the melody. During the first phrase he played a unique seven beat fill (from beats two to eight). With similar unpredicability, Patton began the third stanza with an unexpected melodic variation beginning an octave above the keynote. Instead of making his guitar fills identical in the fashion of Mississippi dance blues, Patton offered two related

figures. The upshot of his various alterations was a tune that was more subtle and less rigid than the prevalent Mississippi dance blues. This triumph of an individual over a formula would typify Patton's recordings.

Given Patton's creative approach to *If You Take My Woman*, it is safe to assume that he either invented or dramatically rearranged the other song he presented to Miller as one of his two earliest pieces. Unlike *If You Take My Woman*, this tune, which Patton called *Maggie*, formed one of the cornerstones of his performing repertoire and had only limited currency among blues singers. It was played in the same style as his later-famous *High Water Everywhere* and used a guitar arrangement he would record at least seven times over, more often than any other accompaniment. Its title verse was popularized through Tommy Johnson's 1928 rendition of the piece, *Maggie Campbell Blues:*

> Who's that yonder, comin' down the road?
> It walks like Maggie, but she walks too slow.

According to Miller, Patton "turned it off in the last verse— instead a-sayin': 'comin' down the road?' he said: 'Who's that yonder all dressed in red? Walkin' like the children that Moses led.'"[4] Patton must have either popularized or originated the instrumentation of *Maggie*, for when Nathan Bankston (an early crony of Patton and Johnson) heard the Johnson recording of *Maggie Campbell*, he was prompted to remark: "That sounds like Charlie Patton."

The title lyric of *Maggie* was apparently suggested by a nineteenth century spiritual. A song that the Fisk Jubilee Singers featured in concert tours of the 1870s began:

> Oh, who is that a coming?
> Don't you grieve after me...
> It looks like Gabriel
> Don't you grieve after me.[5]

Another hymn, *Who's Dat Yandah?*, began with a similar lyric:

> O who's dat yandah? an' a who's dat yandah?
>
> Say, who's dat yandah?
> Looks like a' my Lord comin' in de sky.[6]

But the phrasing and melody of *Maggie* did not evoke a spiritual. In its various recorded versions, *Maggie* used a free melodic line that amounted to

a series of vocal riffs rather than a fixed tune. Whereas melodic variations were incidental in most blues or spirituals, they were fundamental to *Maggie*, which stands as the only genuinely improvisatory blues melody found in 1920s' recording.

Patton never recorded *Maggie* with its original title lyric. His first recording of it was issued as *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*, but was remembered by Booker Miller as *Lord Have Mercy On My Wicked Soul*, the expression that began its fourth verse. Like its counterparts, this version was basically rendered in ten beat vocal phrases, each phrase consisting of clusters of six and four beats. Each phrase ended on the keynote, which was also sung on the sixth beat of the first two phrases of each stanza. Because a minor third rather than a dominant was ordinarily sung on the sixth beat of the final phrase, the melody had a crude cast, particularly as the same note generally launched the preceding phrase snippet. Other than its keynote returns on the sixth and tenth beats, however, the song had no obligatory notes: seven different intervals were used to begin a phrase, while five were employed to resume it on the seventh beat. Instead of singing a theme with variations, Patton produced a unique song with no specific theme:

	first beat	*seventh beat*
verse 1		
line 1	*minor seventh*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*keynote*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*minor 3rd*	*minor 3rd*
verse 2		
line 1	*subdominant*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*subdominant*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*minor 3rd*	*minor 7th*
verse 3		
line 1	*subdominant*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*minor 3rd*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*supertonic*	*supertonic*
verse 4		
line 1	*subdominant*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*minor 3rd*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*supertonic*	*minor 7th*

verse 5		
line 1	*subdominant*	*dominant*
line 2	*minor 3rd*	*augmented 4th*
line 3	*minor 3rd*	*minor 7th*
verse 6		
line 1	*minor 3rd*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*subdominant*	*major 3rd*
line 3	*augmented 4th*	*keynote*

Patton's melodic variations were accompanied by changes in volume, which lent an element of drama to his singing that was not found in dance blues. It was the expressiveness of Patton's singing rather than the character of the melodic lines that made *Screamin' And Hollerin'* so striking: in this respect, it differed from a ditty in the style of *Turn Your Money Green,* which could easily be rendered by whistling. One of Patton's expressive devices was to drop an octave (to B°) on the last beat of the first two lines when he sang the keynote. By ending the stanza an octave higher (at b°), he made the final declaration appear more emphatic.

Patton's subsequent recreations of *Maggie* were no less spontaneous sounding than *Screamin' And Hollerin'*. In *Moon Going Down* (recorded nearly a year afterwards), Patton freely substituted major thirds and sixths for minor thirds and sevenths:

	first beat	*seventh beat*
verse 1		
line 1	*major 6th*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*major 6th*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*major 3rd*	*minor 3rd*
verse 2		
line 1	*augmented 4th*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*subdominant*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*major 3rd*	*minor 3rd*
verse 3		
line 1	*major 6th*	*minor 3rd*
line 2	*major 6th*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*major 6th*	*major 3rd*

verse 4		
line 1	*augmented 4th*	*major 3rd*
line 2	*dominant*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*major 6th*	*major 3rd*
verse 5		
line 1	*major 6th*	*major 3rd*
line 2	*minor 7th*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*major 6th*	*major 3rd*
verse 6		
line 1	*minor 3rd*	*major 3rd*
line 2	*keynote*	*minor 3rd*
line 3	*major 6th*	*major 3rd*

Maggie was a revolutionary dance tune not only melodically, but rhythmically as well. Its vocal lacked a sustained accenting pattern, and in this respect was a basic departure from black dance music. Morever, Patton did not give his accented beats equal stress, as was the universal practice of dance arrangements, black or white: some stressed beats were more vehement than others.

These rhythmic innovations were made possible by the advent of the Shimmy-She-Wobble, the dance for which *Maggie* was designed. The Shimmy was a contact dance done to both slow and fast songs and was current at the dawn of Patton's career: in 1907, when *Maggie* should have been a recent composition, a song called *Shimmy She Wobble* was played in Bolton, Mississippi.[1] As danced to Mississippi blues, the Shimmy bore little resemblance to the white counterpart popularized in 1918 by Gilda Gray, Mae West, and Bea Palmer. Whereas the white Shimmy was coyly suggestive, the black Shimmy was actively erotic: "...The white folks never did *shimmy,*" Sam Chatmon recalled. "...Just to get with a woman and stand like we used to do, and wobblin' upside her...I never did see no white folks doin' that..." Its imitations of coitus were too realistic for Chatmon's liking: "One night...I'se about sixteen or seventeen years old...I had to quit dancin' with a girl: she shimmy'd so till she got my thing hard and got it on the side and was workin' it so fast I'se fixin' to do what I had to do in my pants...From then on...I didn't like no Shimmy."

Both the lack of a systemized accent pattern and the different stresses given to accented beats of *Maggie* worked to obliterate suggestions of a step dance, and to direct the attention of dancers to pelvic or hip motions. The latter technique would become basic to Patton's execution of Shimmy tunes. He used it to give a sensuous beat to his guitar fills in *Green River* and *Pea*

Vine Blues: instead of equally emphasizing the accented second and fourth beats, he gave the second beat a harder stress.

The free style of singing Patton employed on various versions of *Maggie* was complemented by his non-melodic guitar accompaniment. Though it featured the I-IV-V harmony that was conventional in blues, the accompaniment of *Screamin' And Hollerin'* was founded on riffs that moved rhythmically with Patton's singing. Within a given verse his accompaniment amounted to an eight piece mosaic of independent fills and phrases. In a seemingly unprecedented departure from the realm of dance blues, Patton used three different guitar lines to accompany the first vocal phrase of *Screamin' And Hollerin'*. (In later versions of the piece, he contrived at least three other ones.) A repeating one measure bass phrase involving four notes (from the tonic to the dominant beneath it) was launched on the second beat and continued for three measures (with the accompaniment of the fifth verse extended to four measures). Patton used this figure to shore up the weak sixth beat of his vocal, which was otherwise cast in a 1-2 accenting pattern. The guitar phrase took a 1-2-3-4 accenting pattern: by launching it on the second vocal beat, Patton made it mesh with the rhythm pattern of his song:

Vocal Beats:	1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10
Guitar Beats:	1-2-3-4-1-2-3-4-1-2-3-4

Both this integration of two rhythmic currents and the use of the guitar to supply an accent where the vocal lagged rhythmically were probably real innovations in the realm of black dance music, which would remain rhythmically dependent on vocal accenting throughout the 1920s.

During the last three beats of each measure Patton added extra percussion by slapping the body of his guitar. Another notable departure *Screamin' And Hollerin'* presented from the rigid realm of ordinary dance music was the skillful way Patton adjusted his accompaniment to follow his vocal inflections, particularly when playing a IV^7 treble chord during two measures of the second phrase.

Patton's guitar phrasing was as unpredictable as his accenting and choice of vocal notes. For a piece of dance music, *Screamin' And Hollerin'* had an extremely nebulous phrasing pattern. Only two verses took the same format, and only the last phrase of each verse was couched in a conventional "ten/six" vocal/instrumental beat pattern:

	vocal beats	*follow-up instrumental beats*
verse 1	*10*	*4*
(13 bars)	*10*	*12*
	10	*6*
verse 2	*9*	*4*
(11¾ bars)	*10*	*8*
	10	*6*
verse 3	*10*	*6*
(13 1/2 bars)	*10*	*12*
	10	*6*
verse 4	*10*	*6*
(13 1/2 bars)	*10*	*6*
	10	*6*
verse 5	*10*	*10*
(16 1/2 bars)	*10*	*12*
	10	*6*
verse 6	*10*	*6*
(13 bars)	*10*	*12*
	10	*4*

In a later version of the song, *Revenue Man Blues*, Patton variously sang ten, eleven, twelve, and thirteen beat vocal phrases.

The most important characteristic of *Maggie* and its off-shoots was that it was not a set song, but a work of performance. It had no given style of vocal delivery: a lyric might be rendered at a full shout in the fashion of *Moon Going Down*, or in the softer voice that typified *Screamin' And Hollerin'*. The tempo was likewise a matter of whim. The song had no fixed text. Even the near obligatory keynote ending of its individual vocal phrases was dispensable: some phrases of *Moon Going Down* ended on major thirds and dominants, while some phrases of the related *High Water Everywhere* ended on minor thirds. The result of this free-wheeling approach to dance music was three-fold. The focus of the listener was diverted to Patton the performer, whose material seemed to flow from within. Secondly, his lack of repetitiveness forbade close

imitations of his work. Finally, *Maggie* and its descendants seemed to be an expression of mood, or of the moment.

The remarkable extent to which Patton escaped the rigidity of his peers is seen by a comparison between his versions of *Maggie* and a nameless, nondescript vocal melody that was its first cousin. This air, which was popular among Memphis and Mississippi blues singers, used three intervals (the keynote, minor third, and minor seventh) over its initial two vocal phrases, with an added dominant in the final phrase. Its representatives included Will Weldon's *Turpentine Blues* and *Hitch Me To Your Buggy, Drive Me Like A Mule* (both recorded in 1928), Arthur Petties' *Two Time Blues* (1928), Bill Broonzy's *Big Bill Blues* and *Starvation Blues* (1928), and Son House's *Preachin' Blues* (1930). A single rendition of *Maggie* has more variation than all of these songs put together.

Though Patton's musical gifts doubtless bred dissatisfaction with fixed melodies and arrangements, his spontaneity might also have attested to exposure to the black church, where extemporaneous preaching and singing were common. Listening to a Patton record, Booker Miller mused: "The blues is kinda like workin' in the church, I guess. Whatever the 'spirit' say do, you do it."

While only the title couplet of *Maggie* was apparently drawn from a spiritual, some of its melodic ingredients could have been suggested by religious song. A one chord bottleneck spiritual Patton recorded in 1934, *Troubled 'Bout My Mother,* used the same four intervals of *Maggie*'s variously-named melodic cousins. Its simple repetitive cadences from the minor third to keynote were characteristic of *Maggie,* while its dip from the minor seventh to dominant half way through the first line (at the seventh beat) was a standard blues cadence used in the final line of a stanza. There was an even closer resemblance between *Troubled 'Bout My Mother* and *Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues,* the first tune Patton recorded. Excluding the sustained notes at the end of each phrase, the former spiritual paired an unorthodox fourteen beat vocal phrase with another one of thirteen beats. The single vocal phrase of *Bo Weavil* similarly consisted of fourteen beats. Moreover, its texture and right hand technique were similar to that of *Troubled 'Bout My Mother,* as well as other spirituals like *Jesus Is A Dying Bed Maker* and *I Shall Not Be Moved.*

The one chord strumming and picking of the seven bar *Bo Weavil* stands apart from Patton's other secular endeavors and sounds almost archaic beside his two earliest efforts. In its partial dependence on pattern strokes and full use of the lower strings (involving much interplay between open fifth and fourth strings) it has a decidedly banjoistic flavor, comparable to the cruder and slower playing of Georgia's Julius Daniels on *Ninety Nine Year Blues* (1927). The work could not be related to any known musical genre: it used a unique 3 1/2 bar

vocal phrase, coupled with a 2 1/2 bar bottleneck riff, and (for most lines) a single measure of open chord strumming. Except in the first phrase of the song, Patton accompanied the first nine beats of singing (involving only the keynote) with open string work. The chanting quality of the vocal and drone-like quality of the open string work permitted Patton to end the phrase with a climactic flourish: on the tenth beat he simultaneously sang a minor third as a crescendo, and launched a descending top string bottleneck riff (involving the minor third, keynote, and minor seventh). The ten beat riff that followed on the heels of Patton's vocal began with a three beat tonic chord pitched at an unworldly b^2 — beyond the normal range of a guitar and within that of a violin. The riff concluded with three lower notes (the minor third, and keynote plucked twice) scattered over six beats: each was played with a heavy vibrato and allowed to reverberate and fade on a subsequent rest beat. Patton's exquisite treatment of this rough-hewn tune implies a broad exposure to sounds, and an urge to upgrade the music about him.

This urge was particularly evident in Patton's remarkably animated recording of *Spoonful*, a "rag" ditty celebrating cocaine addiction that may have dated to the turn of the century, when the *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* reckoned that 80% of the city's blacks used the drug (available for a nickel or dime at pharmacies). The song likely originated in black vaudeville: in its flippant, thematic treatment of its subject and the diatonic character of its melody, it lay far afield from conventional black music.

Patton used the basic ingredients of *Spoonful* to forge a new melody with a new rhythm and a more vivid style of presentation. He discarded the $\underline{1}$-2-3-4 accenting pattern used in conventional versions by Papa Charlie Jackson and Charley Jordan in favor of a syncopated 1-$\underline{2}$ pattern, played the piece at a frantic tempo, and "talked" the title word of the tune with two different three beat bottleneck slides. By using a bottleneck technique in an open tuning (E major), Patton was able to accompany the song with a facile series of seven chords. In its opening section, the melody descended in a high register (with Patton fretting at the eleventh free fret, were he capoed one fret while tuned to standard pitch) and involved three chords (I-VII-VI) played on three beats. This section culminated in a bottleneck glissando that began on the fourth and ended on the second degree of the scale. In the second part of the song, Patton played ascending bottleneck chords (II-III-IV-V) in a lower register and ended with a glissando from the third to the keynote.

Whereas the conventional *Spoonful* amounted to eight bars, Patton's phrasing patterns (and the placement of his bottleneck slides) were dictated by his lyrics:

Doctor dyin'
"In Hot Springs!"
Just 'bout a (spoonful)
These women goin' crazy
Every day in their life 'bout a...

"Lookey here baby you would slap me?"
"Yes I will!"
Just 'bout a (spoonful)

Would you kill a man?
"Yes I would, you know I'd kill him."
Just 'bout a (spoonful)

Hot Springs was then renowned for its restorative waters, which were deemed to cure "chronic malaria, alcoholism, and drug addictions..."[2].

Patton's dialogues, which sometimes extended for a measure and a half, used a variety of voices, some of which were removed from his own style of speech: "he spoke slow," Booker Miller recalled. The way Patton glided effortlessly between speech and song produced an unpredictable effect, and gave the piece an elastic structure. A verse might involve as many as ten and a half bars. In some stanzas the opening three chords were instrumentalized; when Patton began a verse with heightened intensity (as in singing "Would you kill a man?"), he added to this effect by playing a succession of high pitches: Bb^2, A^2, and G^2 (from the fourth to the second).

Patton made *Spoonful* completely subordinate to himself: in so doing he not only triumphed over a form, but also developed a piece that only he could have performed.

Our earliest first-hand glimpse of Patton's career is provided by a former musician named Ernest Brown and nicknamed "Whiskey Red", who seems to have met him in 1907.[3] Brown became his near neighbor upon arriving at Arthur Peerman's plantation a mile and a half northeast of Cleveland, or some three and a half miles west of *Dockery*. During the four years Brown cropped there he witnessed Patton's rise to local celebrity. "He playin' the same kind of music like he did when he put out them records," Brown told Steve LaVere in a 1974 interview.[4] "...When I first knowed him he wasn't playin' as good as he was after I began to find out who he was..." Though Brown was unaware of it at the time, he was to learn the two of them had the same musical mentor, which discovery he made when he met up with Patton at Robinsonville around 1926. "I say: 'Who learn you how to play a guitar?'" Brown said of their conversation

Speir store c.1929 - H.C. Speir at right.

Mississippi delta, 1940.

Juke joint, Memphis, Tennessee, 1939.

Juke joint, Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1939.

Dockery's Plantation entrance.

Dockery's plantation commissary.

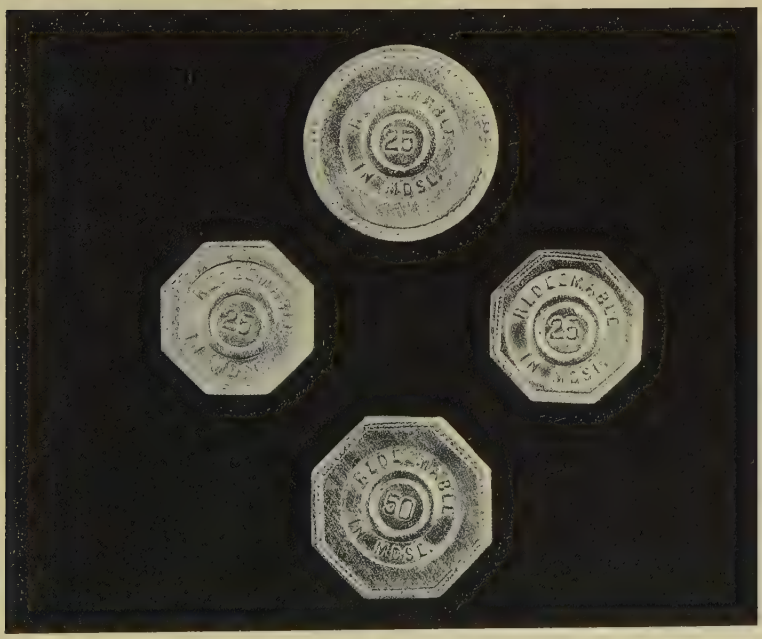
WILL DOCKERY

MERCHANT AND FARMER

Dockery, Miss., ... 193

Dockery stationary.

Will Dockery



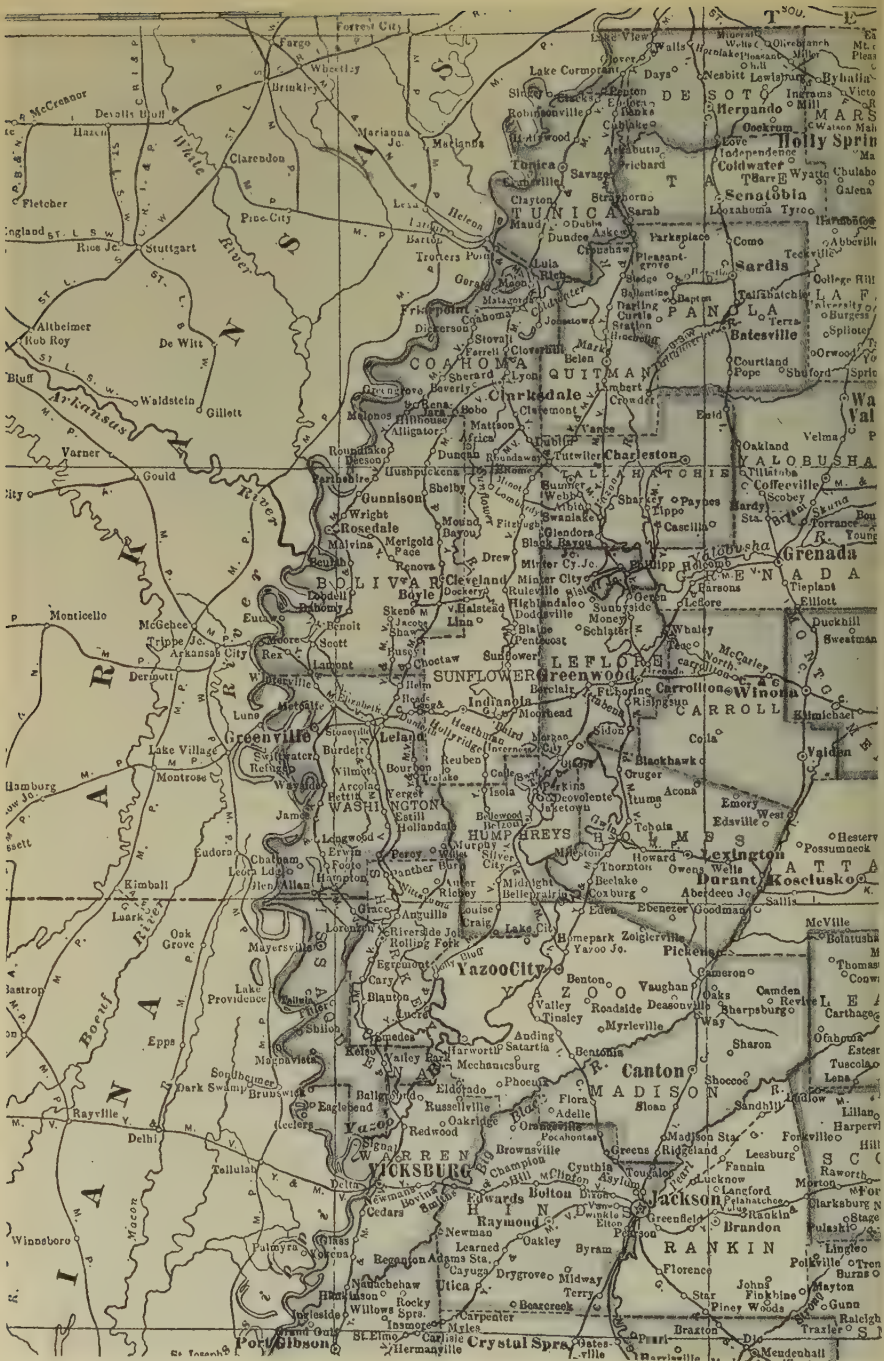
Dockery scrip coins (front and back).

Clarksdale drugstore, 1909.

Y & MV Railroad

Dick Bankston

Son House imitating Charlie Patton


Fargo
Forrest City
Wheatley
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McCrenor
Devalls Bluff
Hazen
Clarendon
White River
Fletcher
Pine City
Stuttgart
Rice Jc.
Altheimer
Rob Roy
De Witt
Bluff
Waldstein
Gillett
Varner
Gould
Arkansas River
Monticello
McGehee
Tribbe Jc.
Arkansas City
Dermott
Lake Village
Montrose
Hamburg
Eudora
Kimball
Luark
Oak Grove
Mayersville
Lake Providence
Epps
Mooreville
Southbrook
Dark Swamp
Brunswick
Rayville
Delhi
Tallulah
Winnsboro
Palmyra
Port Gibson
Grand Gulf
St. Joseph
Lake Corinth
Slayton
Robinsonville
Hillsdale
Tunica
Marianna
Marianna Jc.
Helena
Lake View
Walls
Hernando
Nesbitt
Lewisburg
Bylalia
Ingrams
Victoria
Mill
Mars
Watson
Malin
Oakrum
Holly Springs
Love
Independence
Coldwater
Wyatte
Chulabo
Galena
Senatobia
Lorabama
Tyro
Hernando
Abberville
Como
Teckville
Sardis
College Hill
Tallahatchie
Batesville
Courtland
Pope
Shuford
Sprite
Orwood
Clarkdale
Clarksville
Clarkmont
Vance
Enid
Oakland
Velma
Yalobusha
Tillatoba
Coffeeville
Scobey
Grenada
Torrance
Young
Tieplant
Elliott
Duckhill
Sweetman
Winona
Kilmichael
Vaiden
Carrollton
Carroll
Greenwood
Greenville
Leland
Lexington
Durant
Kosciusko
Yazoo City
Canton
Jackson
Vicksburg
Port Gibson
Crystal Springs
Pickens
Cameron
Sharon
Brandon
Pelahatchee
Rankin
Florence
Star
Piney Woods
Finkbine
Johns
Mayton
Gunn
Raleigh
Traxler
Mendenhall
Braxton
Pearl
Bolton
Edwards
Raymond
Clinton
Utica
Bovina
Cayuga
Learned
Newman
Oakley
Byram
Terry
Midway
Drygrove
Bearcreek
Carpenter
Carlisle
Hermanville
Willows Sprs.
Rocky
Insmore
Nanuchehaw
Hillsdale
Joyleside
Reganton
Adams Sta.
Palmyra
Yokena
Glass
Cedars
Newman
Tallula
Delta
Lake City
Homepark
Zoigleville
Yazoo Jo.
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Traxler

Some Day

J. Graydon Hall — James D. Vaughan and H. E. Barnett, owners — H. E. Barnett

1. My tri - als here on earth will cease, Some day, some day:
2. No more in dark-ness I will roam,
3. Those gone be - fore me I shall meet,
4. My lov - ing Sav - ior I shall see, Some day, some hap - py day;

And I will have un - end - ing peace, Some day, some day.
But rest e - ter - nal - ly at home,
My loved ones will my spir - it greet,
With Him in glo - ry I shall be, Some day, some hap - py day.

CHORUS

Some day, some hap - py day, From sin set free;
Some day, From sin my soul is free;

I'll live with Christ for aye, Some day, some day.
I'll live Some day, some hap - py day.

Sheet music for Some Happy Day.

Josephine Chatmon

Dr. Blackhawks Show, Philadelphia, Mississippi, 1920.

Tommy Johnson from Victor Blues catalog.

Jim Jackson c. 1929

Cottondale big house.

Memphis Minnie and Joe McCoy, c.1929.

on that occasion. "He say: 'Earl Harris.' I say: 'How come I don't remember you? I learnt from him, too.'" The answer to this question seems to be that Patton had outgrown his status as Harris' protege by the time Brown came along.

Harris had been a fellow tenant of the Peerman plantation, which was better known as *C.R. Smith's*. "Earl, he's our boss, he's our champ; he's our champ musicianer," Brown recalled. This circle of Peerman players included Harris' brothers Otis and Jimmy, who was known as a "one man band", and assorted Harris understudies, who included Patton's later-renowned duet partner Willie Brown. "There were three or four around there learnin' under Earl," Ernest Brown reported. "...One of 'em was named Louie Black..." Black, another resident of the plantation, was probably the Lewis Black who recorded four crudely played blues in 1927 for Columbia in Memphis.[5] "...Lewis Black, he was just a gamblin' man; he'd play music at times...Long as he could keep from playin' he'd be in the crap game or somethin'...When you'd find him playin' the guitar, he probably got broke...Long as he had money, he drinkin' and gamblin'." Eventually Black fled the area after axing a man in a dispute over a female. In the early 1950s, when Brown last saw him, Earl Harris lived in Memphis.

However intriguing, the Peerman cluster of novices and established musicians seems to have consisted of nonentities, only one of whom (Willie Brown) eventually established a general musical reputation. Even Harris remained an unknown quantity until Steve LaVere interviewed Brown, who noted Patton's early fame. "They're always somebody sendin' for him and carryin' him an' bringin' him to dances," Brown said of Patton. Though Patton sometimes appeared at these events with a mandolinist and a fiddler, he was not only an attraction in his own right, but a genuine musical star. "...People just clownin' over him; they'd follow him everywhere they heard tell of where Charlie Patton was: they was there." In Brown's view, Patton fully merited this acclaim: "...He a good *songster*; he a real singin' man..." His playing seemed no less skillful to Brown: "Charlie Patton, he could play 'overhand,'" he remarked, referring to the gimmick of fretting with the palm turned downwards. "B-flat, he could play it from one end of the guitar to the other. He just was— expert."

Patton's musical relationship to Earl Harris remains conjectural. He could not have learned a style of musicianship from any individual, for Patton did not play in a generalized style. He might have learned *If You Take My Woman* from Harris, or no more than the four beat vamp (with plucked notes on the first two beats, followed by four tonic strums) he used on *Pony Blues, Down The Dirt Road,* and *Screamin' And Hollerin'*, all played in different keys. One indication that Harris and Patton were not notably similar lay in the fact that Ernest Brown had not known of their relationship until Patton remarked on it.

Whatever Patton might have learned from Harris, he could not have become Mississippi's first blues celebrity without offering novelty to his listening audience. His sister's statement in a 1963 interview that he made up his own singing may be taken to mean that his most popular themes were of his own devising.[6]

"Charlie Patton, he had about two-three pieces everybody loved...white and colored," Ernest Brown recalled. Though we do not know what these pieces were, it is certain that *Pony Blues*, a piece played in the E position and sung in F#, was one of them. *Pony Blues* would be as closely identified with Patton's career as *Some Of These Days* was with Sophie Tucker: it was the one song that people who heard Patton readily recalled decades afterwards. It became one of his three pet vocal themes, along with *Maggie* and *Banty Rooster.* While Patton concocted ambitious rearrangements of the former songs, he never succeeded in giving *Pony* a striking instrumental facelift, or spinning out a recorded revision that equalled the original.

Pony Blues remains such an appealing song that it could have made the blues career of anyone who invented it. Its fourteen bar title verse had the kind of insinuating melody that makes for a song hit or standard. Except for its keynote phrase endings, the placid melody of its title verse was altogether untypical of blues. Its four notes employed major intervals (the keynote, major third, major fifth, and major sixth) that eliminated the tonal ambiguity of most blues. The prominence of the dominant in all three phrases further removed it from conventional blues melody, which would often lack a dominant in its first two phrases. Instead of treating the dominant as a ceiling tone (in the fashion of *Maggie*), Patton made it a true melody note by sandwiching it between the higher sixth and lower third. While many blues melodies sound forced, *Pony Blues* began with three complementary phrases, so closely intertwined as to constitute a single basic phrase with variations.

Whereas the first half of the initial phrase ascends during its first three beats, the last part of the phrase inverts its note sequence for four beats (descending from the major sixth to the dominant, the major third, and keynote). The second phrase begins with the same ascent, but instead of hovering at the major sixth on the sixth beat, it repeats the closing cadence of the previous phrase. The third line resumes the melody of the first six beats, and then toys with its three lowest tones for its closing measure.

Patton's remarkable phrasing and rhythmic presentation of *Pony Blues* made it far superior to the ordinary ditty, and converted what would otherwise have been a memorable melody into a masterpiece. Over the first two phrases of the title verse, he held the final word (which began on the tenth beat) for six beats while playing a guitar figure. This hold created a symmetrical effect, since the opening phrase snippet of the tune ("Hitch up my pony") had also

consisted of six beats. The final word of the stanza was held for two full measures—a feat never duplicated on a blues recording.

The vocal accenting of *Pony Blues* was the most complicated of any dance blues song. The unique vocal accenting of the title verse involved a tug of war between a 1-2 scheme and a legato singing style involving sustained notes that displaced expected stresses. As in *Screamin' And Hollerin'*, the vocal had a weak sixth beat that Patton fortified by penetrating his singing with instrumentation. In this instance, he created a complementary rhythm with a non-melodic seven beat mosaic, beginning with a bass tonic note on the second beat followed by three beats of damped and bent treble notes. A three beat variation of this phrase began on the sixth beat:

Vocal Beats:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Guitar Beats:	1	2	3	4	1	2	3			
	b	t	t	t	b	t	t			

(b = bass)
(t = treble)

Patton seems to have been the only blues musician who was able to think in terms of such dual rhythm patterns.

By using short instrumental figures Patton not only filled in every vocal beat (except the opening one, and the fifth beat of the final phrase), but was able to attain a variety of tones and instrumental accenting patterns. The bass and treble interplay that formed Patton's accompaniment punctuations was extremely exotic within the realm of blues-playing. His rhythmic punctuations would have sounded unintelligible without the presence of the vocal line they were grafted onto. In this respect the arrangement given *Pony Blues* was musically ancestral to present day "soul" and disco songs, where percussive phrase snippets abound. The same is not true of Patton's recorded versions of *Maggie*: most of his guitar work on these songs is phrased in single measure blocks. Generally, Patton used a heavy bass to amplify his basic 1-2 vocal beat. His accompaniment was so full that his playing almost had the effect of two guitars: a bass percussionist and a lead guitarist who mimicked accents and embroidered the melody with treble work.

By the time Patton recorded *Pony Blues* in 1929, it must have undergone considerable refining and evolution. The three vocal tunes its six verses contained (each bearing a distinctive phrasing pattern and accompaniment features) marked a level of melodic ambition that was otherwise unknown in the sphere of blues dance music. It involved seven melodic strands; the reiteration of the

same line (A") in each couplet gave its strains a cohesiveness not found in medley presentation:

verse one	AA'A"
verse two	BCA"
verse three	BCA"
verse four	DEA"
verse five	BCA"
verse six	DEA"

The vocal variations introduced unexpected dynamic alterations that contributed an air of drama to the song. In the first variant, a 13 bar stanza, Patton shouted at full voice, dropping to a lowered volume in delivering the second phrase (C). In the second variant, a 16 1/2 bar stanza, he inverted this sequence. In accompanying this variant Patton used the technique he had fostered on *Maggie*: a repeating single measure riff (based on a IV^7 chord) began on the second beat and was extended for two measures beyond the tenth beat. His rhythmic presentation of the first variant was uniquely creative: after singing a ten beat line with a 1-2 accent, Patton strummed a half-measure fill and launched the second phrase with an implied, unaccented IV^7 chord played for a single beat. His first measure of singing then took a 1-2 rhythm pattern; thanks to the accenting of the instrumentalized beat that preceded it, the new vocal pattern did not transform the accenting of the song itself.

Because of its dramatic nuances and percussive orientation, *Pony Blues* demanded an inspired performance, and Patton's recording of the piece in 1929 could not have been exceeded even by himself for inspired musicianship. Patton's timing is wondrous to behold, and he handles his instrument like a toy, producing percussive and tonal contrasts by choking strings for split seconds, muting individual bass notes, and tapping his guitar percussively during the V^7 section over the third and fourth beats of the final vocal phrase. Jazz guitarist Woody Mann terms *Pony Blues* "the most perfect blues recording ever made," and it is certainly one whose magic cannot be indicated by analysis. It was obviously a song that was very dear to Patton, for he played it with sheer love.

Another song that doubtless counted among Patton's early musical signatures was *Banty Rooster*, a Slow Drag bottleneck tune played in "Spanish" (open A chord tuning). This work stood among his most conventional offerings: it featured a standard blues AAB melodic scheme, and hazarded only two minor variations of its tightly-plotted melodic line, which employed six intervals. Its phrasing, too, had a pedestrian cast by comparison to *Maggie* and *Pony*, where Patton extended the blues vocal line to an (one would think) unprecedented

length of eighteen beats. Though the last word of each phrase was drawn out for two extra beats, it obviously originated from a "ten/six" phrase model, and would have been a consistent twelve bar song, except for extra two beat tonic strums added to the end of some stanzas. Unlike most of Patton's tunes, it did not accelerate in tempo.[7] The accompaniment was played with the guitar held in the ordinary upright position (as one gleans from its damped notes) but was fretted only with a bottleneck implement. It involved two chords (I and V) and attained most of its fullness by open string strumming. While the first two vocal phrases are accompanied by top string slides, the final phrase used bass accompaniment. In terms of finesse and elaborateness Patton's arrangement would not have been much to brag about by the time it was recorded in 1929, but it could have posed considerable novelty when it was conceived, particularly in its guitar damping technique.

Patton's striking delivery gives *Banty Rooster* an ominous sound that is conspicuously "bluesier" than his presentation of *Maggie* or *Pony.* In an apparent effort to convey forlornness he dramatically lowered his volume at the end of each line. (In the first two lines of each stanza, this descent coincided with a melodic dip from the dominant to keynote, sometimes occurring in the middle of a word.) The low register of his singing gave it a dirge-like quality: the keynote was pitched at a fifth beneath that of *Pony Blues* (at B°), two octaves below the keynote sounded with a fretting gadget during the filler riff.

Like *Green River* and *Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues*, *Banty Rooster* was infused with a systematic 1-2 accenting pattern. While Patton's use of this pattern often led him to highlight nonessential words, it worked to underscore the most significant words of *Banty Rooster*:

> What you *want* with a *roost*er? He won't *crow* 'fore *day*-aye.
> What you *want* with a *man* when he *won't* do *noth*in' he *say*-aye.

The predicability of this pattern was offset by Patton's accompaniment, and his lack of uniform phrase division. As with *Green River,* the punch line paired two five beat clusters, instead of the stock "six/four" phrase division of the first two vocal lines.

The Slow Drag for which *Banty Rooster* was designed was a black contact dance that dated to the turn of the century. "All it is is just dry screwin'," Johnnie Shines said of the Slow Drag, which he considered the Delta's most popular dance during the 1930s. "Man stands there and just dry screws." Unlike the Shimmy, which fell out of vogue in the 1930s, it was still popular in the early 1940s, when it was featured by Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup.

One guesses that of all of Patton's bedrock pieces, *Banty Rooster* was the least likely to have been his creation. Melodically, it bears a discernable resemblance to *Roll And Tumble,* a Shimmy-She-Wobble bottleneck piece played in the same tuning that was associated with Hambone Willie Newbern of Brownsville, Tennessee and was acquired by Hayes McMullen from bluesmen in the hills east of the Delta in the early 1920s.[8] Its melody was among the least whimsical and most logical of Patton's tunes: its beginning four note ascent (from the dominant to a minor third) was inverted over the last measure of the phrase. The playfulness of the lyrics does not gibe with the funereal sound of Patton's voice, and the way the accenting emphasizes important nouns or verbs in a line did not typify Patton's delivery. The thematic nature of the first three verses makes it untypical of Patton's ordinarily themeless presentations.[9] Patton's accompaniment, moreover, seems evocative of fiddle playing: he sounds the notes of a tonic triad during the two middle beats of his six beat instrumental fill, the same beats that bear Henry Sims' violin insertions in various duets with Patton.[10]

Perhaps the most telling indication that *Banty Rooster* was not a fully original work lies in Patton's ambitious re-arrangement of it as *Down The Dirt Road,* which copies the melody of its first two vocal phrases, but otherwise lies as far afield from its apparent forerunner as *Green River* does from *If You Take My Woman. Dirt Road* is a striking synthesis of *Banty* and *Pony Blues,* transposed to a new playing position (C). While employing the basic tune of *Banty,* it used the phrasing pattern of *Pony*: each phrase-ending word was held for six beats, complementing the way Patton prolonged the third word of the song ("away") for five beats. The phrases ended in the same diminuendo fashion of *Pony,* with Patton embellishing his vocal fade with glissandos between the keynote and the minor seventh beneath it. The accompaniment of *Dirt Road* had overtones of *Maggie* and *Pony.* In the opening line of each stanza Patton played a two measure descending series of snapped notes on the top string that used the same intervals (keynote, minor seventh, and fifth) and timing (two notes per beat) as his accompaniment for the second verse of *Pony.* The second line used a descending guitar phrase in the fashion of *Maggie,* consisting of three full chords: major IV-minor III-I. The way Patton isolated notes within these chords (as well as within the damped V^7 of the final phrase) to make them capture nuances of his vocal accenting was altogether remarkable.

Dirt Road was not without its own unique characteristics, such as the heavy guitar tapping (involving two taps per beat) that accompanied its first line. Unlike Patton's other main works, its accompaniment had a continuous rather than mosaic quality: each beat of the first two vocal phrases was accompanied with instrumentation. The density of his accompaniment made for a

surprising contrast with the last six beats of each verse, which were accompanied only by heavy foot stomping. In the fifth verse, Patton unexpectedly filled this silent section with a descending single note phrase that mimicked his singing.

One would think that Patton would not be tempted to undertake such a spectacular improvement upon *Banty Rooster* had he invented the latter piece. A musician cannot readily improve upon his own inventions, for his inventions reflect his capacities. Had Patton single-handedly developed *Banty Rooster,* he probably would have been incapable of surpassing himself to the extent of performing *Down The Dirt Road* (which, as will be seen, he played early on in his career). One is therefore led to suspect that the latter was his "answer" to a routine blues he learned in the basic form of *Banty Rooster,* just as *Green River* was an "answer" to *If You Take My Woman.*

But the true dimensions of Patton's creativity are incalculable. Booker Miller, who learned the fundamentals of blues-playing from Patton and a Clarksdale guitarist named James Binell, took it for granted that Patton had borrowed from other musicians in the process of establishing his distinctive musical identity. He said: "You can go into show business right now: you couldn't just build your own show your own way—you'd have to take ideas from him, maybe, if he's a showman...and put with yours...and maybe you see another one...until you build your own show."

An older Delta bluesman whose "show" could have have influenced Patton's general approach to performing was D. Irvin, who lived a few miles southeast of *Dockery's* on a plantation between Ruleville and Cottondale, and was better known than most Delta musicians at the time of his death. "In 1932, I'd put D. Irvin around sixty-five and seventy," recalled Miller, who met him when Irvin lived in Quito. "He's a old man: I heard him mention that he'd been playin' around twenty-five or thirty years." Irvin favored the key of E and performed songs like *Big Kate Adams*: his repertoire, David Edwards reports, was comprised of "mostly old-time 'rappin' (strumming) stuff...but he was good." Although Miller observed that Irvin and Patton "played on a different order altogether," he bracketed Irvin in Patton's basic mode as a performer: "D., he made a lotta noise and he clowned a lot. He had what I would call a baritone voice, maybe a bass: it was much lower than Charlie, but he could holler loud..." The guitar "slapping" that Patton used on such works as *Screamin' And Hollerin'* was one of Irvin's own pet mannerisms. A listener who considered Irvin the better guitarist remembered him for the same kind of histrionic hokum for which Patton became celebrated: "...He'd take his guitar...stand up with it, play it all 'tween his legs, and stick it behind his head, say: 'I'm havin' a fit with it, now!" (Another favorite Irvin aside—"Get down, black cows!" came

as a directive to dancers.) Like Patton, Irvin represented himself as both a blues-player and a preacher.

The stunts at which both excelled were themselves a carry-over of nineteenth century plantation minstrelsy, and were already passe in 1910, when a chronicler noted:

> ...the negro minstrel had a manner of performing instrumental music that was peculiarly his own. Trick music, it might be termed, for the banjo and fiddle were played in all sorts of positions, under the leg, behind the back, and over the head.[11]

The same commentator held that such "tricks" had provided the original impetus for nineteenth century black-faced imitations of plantation banjoists.

If Patton's performing mannerisms were far from original, his repertoire was sufficiently varied to have represented a whole host of influences. If he numbered any home-grown mentors besides Earl Harris, he stood to acquire pointers or pieces from an older tenant of *Dockery's* named Henry Sloan, who seems to have had a miniscule reputation when he moved to Chicago in 1918. Patton's sister Viola stated that her brother had been fascinated by Sloan's playing in his youth and followed him all over the plantation to listen to it. She added that Sloan never sang, a fact which (if true) would have relegated him to the role of string band musician or limited his performances to the instrumental "breakdowns" Sam Chatmon and Richard Harney dated to their youth.

Besides Sloan, Patton had at least two relatives who could have had some influence on his guitar-playing. His maternal uncle Sherman Martin, a tall, slender boarder in the Patton household whose gawky appearence earned him to nickname "Rubberneck", played guitar and would have been old enough to give Patton early lessons. His own skills remained minimal, according to David Edwards, who knew him in the 1930s: "...He never done anything, but he practiced under Charlie all the time. He had kind of a light voice, but he had a good voice." Patton's first cousin "Tee-Nicey" Wade (the nickname remarks on his small size, and Wade may be a first name) who lived on the adjoining Dave D. Turner plantation near Ruleville either contributed to Patton's development or numbered among his earliest pupils. They were the same age and played "near about the same songs," reported Millie Barnes, whose marriage to Patton was undercut by his travels with Wade. "He was very good," Booker Miller said of Wade. "He couldn't touch Charlie: Charlie couldn't make him stop playin'." By the 1920s, when Wade had moved to the McCloud plantation near Drew, his association with Patton had become minimal. Another one-time crony

who either borrowed Patton's music or helped mold it was a brakeman on the *Pea Vine* known as "Hobo George". He was also Patton's contemporary and according to one informant (doubtless guided by untutored impression) played "just like Charlie Patton". Originally a *Dockery*'s tenant, he later moved to Cleveland (Mississippi) where he still lived, deaf and infirm, in 1970.

Even if Patton's earliest musical experiments began far earlier than we suppose, his native Hinds County seems to have furnished no models who could have fostered his relish for blues, or given him a musical push in the direction he took. The only local guitarist Josie Williams (the first Chatmon to take up guitar in Bolton) recalled from the days of Patton's (and her own) youth was a man named Charlie Harrison, who taught her half-brother "Bud" to play shortly before she moved to Greenville in 1909. When asked to recount locally popular pieces among blacks during her own girlhood, she volunteered *After The Ball* (an 1892 pop hit that sold five million copies of sheet music and was popularized by John Phillip Sousa), a tearjerker ballad called *Maggie* (of no relation to Patton's like-named blues), and *Careless Love*. Such pieces were the stuff of Patton's earliest musical heritage, if he had one.

While our knowledge of blues history is too nebulous to locate Patton at a fixed or meaningful point within it, he apparently took up blues when the music had no celebrated players and none of the sorrowful connotations the label "blues" would bring to it. The sentimental overtones that would be attached to blues seem to have been largely fostered by W. C. Handy (1873-1958), who merged blues with popular music and impressed the form on the nation's entertainment consciousness. Prior to his enduring 1914 composition, *St. Louis Blues*, national appreciation of black vocal music was generally confined to gospel material.

During the early years of Patton's career, Handy was by far the Delta's most prestigous musical figure. As Willie Moore remarked: "Charlie Patton now, he wasn't 'up' with Handy...Handy's more famous..." Yet it was Handy's exposure to musicians of Patton's lowly stripe that set the framework for his own nation-wide success. The nine piece pop orchestra he headed upon moving to Clarksdale in 1903 catered to the same events as untutored bluesmen: planter's dances, merchant's sales, and boat excursions along the Missisippi. Though Handy even furnished brothel music, he "never played for no colored," Willie Moore reported. "...The colored folks didn't hire him 'cause they didn't have the money," said Moore. "...Onliest way the colored folks would get a chance to dance by Handy's music: he play for the white folks until about one o'clock (in the morning), then he play for the colored from one till train time."

Handy's first awakening to the commercial possibilities of black music came at a dance in Cleveland, a few miles from *Dockery's*, when he was upstaged by

a local string band performing Slow Drag music with a guitar, mandolin, and a bass.[12] In the same period, while sitting at a Tutwiler depot, Handy heard a ragged guitarist play what was apparently a blues song, fretted with a knife and containing the thrice-repeated line Patton was to sing on *Green River Blues*:

> Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.[13]

The style of accompaniment reminded him of Hawaiian guitar-playing, which had been developed between 1893 and 1895 and exported to America sometime after the annexation of Hawaii in the wake of the Spanish-American War.[14]

Patton and W.C. Handy were undoubtedly exposed to blues music (or what was later called blues music) in roughly the same period, for the former was but twelve when Handy arrived in the Delta, where his frank opportunism led him to appraise Delta blues "with the eye of a budding composer."[15] A conventionally trained band musician who specialized in the pop music of the day, he felt that the repetitive string band music he heard in Cleveland "wanted polishing".[16] This polishing was eventually supplied in *St. Louis Blues*, which used three melodic strains, a departure from the verse-repeating blues format that could have been suggested by the medley-style presentation of *Poor Boy Long Ways From Home*. In an attempt to make it suitable as a Tin Pan Alley product, Handy converted blues into a song of sentiment. His emphasis on sentimentality was reflected even in lyrics that he and rough-hewn blues singers used in common. Where Patton played to a jaded audience with a smirking complaint about a woman he is about to abandon, Handy sought to woo a genteel audience by brandishing hurt feeling:

> My baby got a heart like a piece of railroad steel
> After I leave here this mornin' never say:
> "Daddy how do you feel?"
> (Patton: *Heart Like Railroad Steel*: 1929)

> Now if your heart beat like mine it's not made of steel
> And when you learn I left you this is how you'll feel
> (Handy: *Joe Turner Blues*: 1915)

The Tin Pan Alley blues writers who emulated Handy likewise larded matter-of-fact or jesting blues lyrics with a coating of mawkishness. In at least two instances couplets Patton sang overlap with such Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths, and the disparity between them is striking:

Some people say them oversea blues ain't bad
"What was a-matter with 'em?"
It must not a-been them oversea blues I had.
(*Down The Dirt Road Blues*)

Was weary lonesome heartbroken and sad
And yet some people say the weary blues ain't bad.
(Will Nash: *Goin' Down That Long Long Lonesome Road*: 1919)

Gonna buy myself a hammock, gon' carry it underneath through the tree
So when the wind blow, the leave(s) may fall on me.
(*Hammer Blues*)

Got myself a brand new hammock, placed it underneath a tree
I hope the wind will blow so hard the tree will fall on me.
(Spencer Williams: *Mountain Top Blues (Blue Mama's Suicide Wail)*: 1924)[17]

Whether Patton was the borrower or the donor (directly or indirectly) in these instances, he did not have the same understanding of blues as Handy and his colleagues. In Handy's era, vocal dance music was virtually nonexistent as a pop music commodity, and it is scarcely surprising that in dance blues he apprehended nothing more than "folk blues"—crude products with little to commend them besides artless sincerity. Towards the native blues singer he met before leaving the South in 1918 (to launch a publishing career in New York) he took a missionary attitude. As Willie Moore explained: "If Handy got a man like Charlie Patton or me, or anyone, he'd send 'im to *school.*" How Patton appraised Handy is revealed by a fascinating anecdote told by Moore, who was mutually acquainted with both men.

As an eleven year old orphan, Moore had become Handy's ward after catching his eye when the latter played at Tunica's Galton Hotel in September of 1909: "He say: '...Why don't you come with me...I'll learn you how to play these horns...an' you can make plenty money.'"[18] Under Handy's auspices Moore enrolled as one of Tuskegee University's 1700 pupils, learning to read music and play trombone. Upon completing his training in 1911 he worked as

a caretaker for the band Handy inherited from Jim Turner, attending the musicians' instruments, brushing their hats, and shining their shoes. Later he joined the outfit and helped arrange its bookings in Delta towns like Robinsonville and Webb, co-ordinating this activity with the Memphis-based Handy over the telephone. On occasion he played guitar behind various Delta bluemen, whose cultural level he never outgrew.

During one of his business conversations with Handy (the date is uncertain), Moore brought up his recent meeting with Charlie Patton in Hollandale. "He asked me," Moore recalled, "'Didn't Charlie Patton have a band?'...He asked me: 'Can he play?'"

I say: 'Yeah, he can play what he *knows* to play...'

He say: 'What do you think about him?'

I say: 'Well, I couldn't tell you...(The) one thing I can do is tell you to contact him...I'll tell you what I'll do,' say: 'I'll give him an opening next Saturday night, see how he do...' I asked him (Patton) would he come up to a dance; we had a dance at Beulah..."

A not-unfounded belief that Patton could "take with the people" with the music he made "outta hisself" had led Moore to envision Patton as a potential band addition, and the thought of his playing with such an outfit as Handy's did not seem at all incongruous to him: "He coulda joined it, 'cause a whole lotta them blues he's playin' *we'se* playin'. He played 'em on the guitar and we played 'em on the horns and the guitar, and we'd have...a complete thirty-six pieces, from the drum to the piano." Indeed, Patton himself enjoyed Handy's band, or at least the work of its lead guitarist, as he informed Moore when the latter asked him to attend its appearance in Beulah (a town below Rosedale): "Charlie Patton said: 'I hear-ed that band playin' at the depot goin' back to Memphis...' He said: 'Now that fella (the guitarist) play long to suit *me*...'"

But when offered a similar position ("He'd a-got about five dollars out of it"), Patton recognized the inadequacy of his musical background: "...He said he couldn't play nohow 'cause he couldn't read that music...from that sheet," Moore recalled. "If you don't understand that, well that's the job. He just said he couldn't play that."

In retrospect, Patton's lack of formal training was an artistic blessing, for blues did not lend itself favorably to Handy's attempted refinements. Ultimately blues was a performance music, dependent on rhythms that were impervious to sheet music. While one can now see in Handy's misdirected emphasis on blues melody the gaucheness he saw in pre-Tin Pan Alley blues, Charlie Patton did not. He considered himself a casualty of musical illiteracy, ruefully telling Moore of his fruitless attempts to master violin. "He said if he could ever learn to play a lead violin, he'd a-played with Handy."

If Charlie Patton had qualms about affiliating himself with an orchestra, he was no doubt ready to commit himself to a blues career as soon as he learned that people would pay to hear him. H.C. Speir would say of Patton and Tommy Johnson: "Their blues-singing was brought about, more or less...(by) being poor, and neither one of them didn't love work any too well...If they could drum up something to make somebody listen to them...singing blues would make money, understand."

Patton made no attempt to present himself as anything other than a hack musician whose wanderlust was a quest for the barrelhouse dollar. Once he sang:

> Eagle been here, built a nest an' gone
> An' you know by that I ain't gonna be here long.
> (*Circle Round The Moon*: 1929)

He used his avowed mercenary ethic to justify the "clowning" Son House considered demeaning, replying to the latter's criticism of it with the statement: "Oh man, all I want to do is get paid for it, what's the difference?"

House (who thought Patton played "for fun and for money") recalled: "I'd say, 'Yeah, but it just sounds so foolish...'

"'What's the difference, man?'"

Patton no doubt would have been insulted by the suggestion that he played blues for inner satisfaction: blues-playing was disreputable, and blues singers were considered worthless. As Elizabeth Moore recalled: "When I come along, you know, they called 'em 'jukehouse people,' or otherwise they just didn't like 'em. Them there Saturday night folks, good people don't be out with 'em; that's a bad class of people, bad *type* of people...bad *character.*" If money was the only acceptable rationale for pursuing a debased trade, it was only by becoming the drawing-card and the surpassing musician he became that Patton could have purchased a modicum of social and even family respect. The report of Patton's sister that his father initially tried to discourage his musical efforts with a bullwhip, only to relent and eventually buy him a guitar, may be taken to mean that the parent was ultimately impressed by his son's success as a blues singer.[19]

In all likelihood Patton's father had a practical objection to his early blues-playing, namely that it removed him from a family cotton patch that the entire household would have been expected to cultivate. Recalling the early career of Robert Johnson, his former neighbor Elizabeth Moore says: "His mama and them was farmin' out there on the place where we was:...Stepfather would give him a beatin', you know...make him work...He'd tell him to go out there and work; well, he'd get that old guitar, and go off somewheres else. Well, next

day the old man would see him, you know: 'I told you to work. How come you didn't do like I told you? — You got to help me work.'

"Well, he didn't *wanna* work. He didn't have that on his mind. And he tell me or anybody else, he say: 'I don't wanna work; I'm tryin' to learn how to make my livin' *without* pickin' cotton.' He say: 'An' I got this here guitar music on my mind and that's what I wanna learn.'

"The old man would beat him...Every time he'd beat him, he'd run off. He'd get him a pretty good-size stick and a switch, all mixed together; he'd give him a good beatin' up...Well, he'd be gone two or three weeks 'fore the old lady would see him again."

Patton's own dread of manual labor gave him a strong incentive to hone his musical skills so that he could make a living at blues. "Charlie hated work like God hates sin," Son House remarks. "He just natural-born hated it. It didn't look right to him." He not only thumbed his nose at labor on one of his recordings (singing, on *Rattlesnake Blues*: "I ain't gonna have no job mama, rollin' through this world") but exalted himself above his more industrious neighbors: "Charlie called himself 'smart' 'cause he didn't like to work," House recalled.

His white boss probably agreed with this self-assessment. "If he was smart enough to be a musician," Joseph Dockery submits, "he was probably smart enough to get by (on the family plantation) without workin'." David Edwards (who knew Patton from the 1930s) notes: "Now Charlie Patton had a pretty good mind of his own. He lived on the plantation but he didn't do too much work: he stayed 'in' with the boss: he worked a little to stay there, but when he start to recordin'...the boss give him a break."

Perhaps Patton liked to promote this impression of himself as a farmer turned recording artist, for it was echoed by a blues player who hardly knew him, Ishmon Bracey: "He farmed. When he *did* farm. After he started puttin' out records, he didn't have time, 'cause he's goin' from town to town. After he started recording he didn't farm any more. Mighty little."

Of all Patton's associates, only Richard Harney claimed that he was more than a casual laborer: "He worked mostly at the farm mostly all the time," Harney insisted. "He didn't do much playin'. No!...I'm tellin' you what I *know*, lotta folks don't think and don't believe it — that fella do nothin' but workin' on them farms...Fool wasn't gettin' nothin' out of it — no money..."

But when and where Patton performed such drudgery remains a well-kept secret. Tom Cannon says: "He picked cotton long in the fall, but long in the former part of the year he'd be here and yonder...He never did settle down for no farmin'." The cotton picker was the lowest form of plantation laborer, hired by the day (and paid by hundredweights of cotton picked), receiving no

board. From the time Sara Garrett set foot on *Dockery's* until Patton's forced departure from the plantation eleven years later he never tilled his own crop: "...That was his 'thing', to play music, you know: he would work, but he wasn't steady...You know some people have different talent; they have to go 'to' that talent; they can't go over and they can't go under. And that's what Charlie was: he was just a kind of sport-like guitar-player."

Ernest Brown, who knew Patton in the early days of his career, recalled him as a "high sport" and regarded him less philosophically than did Sara Garrett. "He was just a loafer," Brown said matter-of-factly. "...Just a loafin' musicianer."

As a neophyte careerist the young loafer operated in the midst of a plantation boom coupled with labor shortages, which meant that he stood to make real money at his trade, but incur the real displeasure of figures like Will Dockery. The contemporary Mississippi economy was portrayed thusly by an observer: "During the five years from 1903 to 1907 there was a phenomenal demand for cotton hands, and planters were eager to get anybody that looked like work...hence the Negro had the agreeable sensation of seeing people compete for him."[20] This boom, however, was short-lived, thanks to the panic of 1907 that lowered cotton and timber prices. While the boll weevil struck the Delta in 1908 and infested Sunflower county two years afterwards, it did surprisingly little damage: "...the Yazoo Delta's favorable dew moisture, vegetation, and soil conditions...endowed Delta lands with an inherent resiliency to the boll weevil," writes one historian.[21] Perhaps for that reason Patton's *Mississippi Bo Weavil* (which he should have begun featuring in 1908-1910) is a waggish work; the weevil is construed as a funny fellow, making the rounds like a blues singer:

> Bo weavil left Texas Lord he bid me 'Fare thee well,' Lordie!
> "Where you goin' now?"
> "I'm goin' down the Mississippi, gonna give Louisiana hell", Lordie!

Though the gradual spread of the boll weevil from Texas to other Southern states may have encouraged this droll geography lesson, the insect was not the roustabout of Patton's portrayal, but a seasonal migrant who liked to stay within a single field.[22]

Of Patton's own comings and goings as a teenage blues singer our knowledge is scant. In 1908 or 1909 he took a fatal flier from his marriage to Millie Barnes by going to Dermott, Arkansas with "Tee-Nicey" Wade, one of his early

playing partners on *Dockery's.*[23] Earlier, he had played with his wife Roxie Gibson, with whom he lived near *Dockery's* sawmill, on what was called the Sixteen Section of the plantation. His uncle Sherman would escort him to parties beyond the plantation, and may have assisted him with guitar.

It is apparent from Patton's recordings that he was primarily a soloist even as a developing musician. His idiosyncratic song structures and his tendency to alter a phrasing pattern within one piece stamp them as solo enterprises. Had Patton formed an early habit of working with duet partners his accompaniments would have been less ambitious, and his instrumental timing more pedestrian. Most likely, he would not have developed his penchant for fast tempos (which he indulged in *Screamin' And Hollerin'*, *Pony Blues*, *Down The Dirt Road*, and *Mississippi Bo Weavil*) had he cut his musical teeth with duet partners. Even his most celebrated playing partner of later years, Willie Brown, was heard to complain that Patton's fast-paced music demanded too much effort to accompany: "He...say when he played with Charlie Patton...Patton played too fast," reported Willie Moore. "...(He said) Charlie Patton was a good player, but he played too fast, so that'd work you..."

The diminutive Brown (whose nickname was "Little Bill") was among three early casual associates of Patton to leave a legacy of blues recording, and the only one who appears to have actually played with him to an appreciable extent. A Patton protege of sorts, he was nearly ten years Patton's junior and was too young to have taken part in the latter's early musical development. Raised on Peerman's plantation near Cleveland, he left Sunflower County for northern Mississippi by 1916, settling in the vicinity of Robinsonville. "They stuck together more at Robinsonville than anywhere I knowed," Ernest Brown said of Patton and Brown, who would record together in 1930.

Henry Sims, a Patton contemporary who accompanied him on fiddle during a 1929 recording session, was raised on Doctor Hall's plantation near Renova, an all-black community three miles north of Cleveland. "...They was just about raised up down there together," Sims' sister Roberta Jameson said of the pair. She recalled how Patton would "wake up the neighborhood" with his late-night music-making in Renova (adding, "They sure would get up to hear him, though"), but didn't remember his ever playing with Sims, who took up guitar as "just a young boy" and developed his skills in solitude, perched alongside the local railroad tracks. "...I'd hear him sit up many a night...just by himself...we'd laugh about it," she recalled. Sims was "about grown," she reported, when he began offering his music at Renova and Cleveland picnics and house parties with a guitar-playing cousin, Harry Miller, who later moved to Chicago and died there of poisoning. Though Sims was only incidentally a guitarist, he did hazard a rendition of *Pony Blues*. By 1910 he had moved "all out from Drew";

after brief interludes of farming near the towns of Sunflower and Merigold, he settled permanently in Coahoma County, far removed from Patton's musical world.

Tommy Johnson, who became one of Mississippi's most imitated bluesmen and was the first person to offer recorded renditions of Patton's musical motifs, had a brief but significant tenure in Sunflower County. Born on a farm west of Terry (in the central Mississippi hills) around 1896, he learned "common chords" on the guitar from his brother Ledell (who had taken up the instrument in 1900) but did not even own a guitar when he eloped with an older woman in 1914 and settled in the lower Delta town of Rolling Fork. Once there, Ledell recalled, he played music "from Rollin' Fork to Boyle, Cleveland, and Drew...all around there." When he returned home two years later, "he done got pretty good" as a guitarist (in Ledell's estimation) and had evolved all of the pieces he would popularize throughout central Mississippi over the next forty years: *Big Road Blues* (his theme song), *Cool Drink Of Water, Bye Bye Blues,* and *Maggie Campbell.*

Perhaps astonished by his brother's sudden development, Ledell took all of these pieces to be the basic handiwork of Nathan (Dick) Bankston, a guitarist who lived near Drew and later moved to Memphis. But Bankston's own recollections appeared to vindicate the originality of Johnson's two best-known staples, while pointing up his partial debt (direct or otherwise) to Charlie Patton. He first met Johnson in 1914, as a seventeen year old, when the latter visited Drew, and no doubt met him seven years later, when Johnson passed a year on a plantation in the vicinity. In the entire time he knew Johnson he never heard him play *Maggie Campbell Blues* (the Johnson rendition of Patton's *Maggie*) or *Bye Bye Blues* (his rendition of *Pony Blues*). Upon listening to Johnson's 1928 recording of the latter song, he remarked: "That's me." He credited himself with developing its arrangement (based on Patton's version) and its basic stanzas, but declared that he neither taught Johnson the piece nor (to the best of his recollection) ever played it in his presence. Evidently Johnson filched the song, and concealed it from Bankston.

Johnson, Bankston said, was already playing *Big Road Blues* and *Cool Drink Of Water* (his second most popular song) when he first arrived in Drew in 1914. He had likewise developed the falsetto yodel that was the most distinctive and influential aspect of his singing.

Bankston himself remained Patton's only early imitator who lived to testify to their relationship. Born near Crystal Springs (a town about eight miles below Terry) in 1897, he was christened "Nathan" but dubbed "Dick" by his parents, and used the names interchangeably. Upon his father's death in 1907, Bankston and his brother moved with their mother to "Lumbard", as he called the

Sunflower County town of Lombardy. When her death orphaned them three years afterwards, the Bankston brothers moved to a plantation near Drew, a town near the northern part of *Dockery's* that then numbered 278 residents.

Already a fiddler like his brother, the thirteen year old Bankston was soon introduced to guitar by a resident of the A. E. Jennings plantation (whose owner was one of Will Dockery's best friends) near Sumner. The musician's name was Willie Brown, and he was not the same man as his dimunitive, like-named counterpart in Cleveland.[24] In 1910, the year Bankston met Brown, the latter was about twenty five years old (several years older, Bankston thought, than Charlie Patton) and had a wife named Willie.

Bankston's first encounter with Charlie Patton took place shortly after he took up guitar and was effected through Brown, who had previously touted Patton as a skilled musician to him. "I walked into one of the jukehouses somewhere but wheres, I don't know now, it's been so long," Bankston said, over fifty years afterwards. "...Willie pointed him out to me, and Willie was playin' with him before I was."

From Bankston's wispy recollections of Patton we learn chiefly that he had a sizeable repertoire in 1910, and had already developed most of the front-line material he would feature at his first recording session two decades later. Among these pieces were *Pony Blues*, *Banty Rooster Blues*, *Down The Dirt Road Blues*, *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*, and *Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues*. He was even then, in Bankston's words, a "clown from his heart" who would "throw his guitar back his head and everywhere" as he played, a feat he probably would not have attempted before gaining considerable expertise. "I couldn't do that," Bankston said of Patton's stunt.

It was from Patton that Bankston learned *Pony Blues*, his favorite of all Patton's pieces, and the basis of his own *Bye Bye Blues*. Bankston's relatively homey approach to this material is indicated by its one-line title stanza and its unrhymed second verse, which Tommy Johnson's recording preserved:

> Bye an' bye, baby bye an' bye
> It's bye an' bye, baby won't you bye an' bye?
>
> The Good Book tell you: "Reap just what you sow."
> Don't reap it now, baby reap it, bye an' bye.

The years between 1910 and 1920 witnessed a considerable amount of blues traffic in the general vicinity of Drew, generated equally by squatters like Johnson and now obscure natives like the guitarist Jim Halloway and the fiddler

Skeeter Davis. Most of these musicians appear to have been amateurs, or provincials with no exalted musical aspirations. "Wasn't nobody up there playin' more pieces than my brother," remarked Ledell Johnson, whose brother seems to have made do with perhaps three or four songs. Whereas Johnson learned (after a fashion) but two Patton pieces, Bankston confined his Patton imitations to *Pony Blues* and never learned a Tommy Johnson piece, remarking: "I never did play with Tommy none." The links between these musicians are thus fleeting and tenuous, and there is no reason for supposing that the performers who congregated around Drew took either a regional or collective approach to music.[25]

Of the musicians who were to be found in the area east of *Dockery's*, Patton's only real professional associate was Willie Brown, who had settled on the Jim Yeager plantation near Drew and married a female guitarist from Crystal Springs named Josie Gardener by the onset of the First World War. "Him and Charlie traveled around some every which a-way, played a long time together," Tom Cannon reported. Unlike his smaller, like-named counterpart "Little Bill" Brown, who worked as Patton's silent accompanist, Willie Brown "loved to sing," reported Ledell Johnson. Of his voice, Sara Garrett remarked: "He could sing very good, but not like Charlie..." As a performer, Tom Cannon noted: "He could show off good, but not like Charlie."

Though Brown never recorded before his death in Memphis sometime in the 1940s or 1950s, much can be inferred about his music on the basis of other recordings. Listening to the instrumentation of "Little Bill" Brown's *Future Blues*, Bankston remarked: "That doesn't sound like Willie." It would thus seem that he did not play a version of Patton's *Maggie*, particularly as Bankston also likened Tommy Johnson's equivalent to Patton's music. Since Bankston developed *Pony Blues* by listening to Patton, it would seem that the arrangement developed by Brown was similarly derivative. It was slower and more sedate than Patton's, and played much in the fashion of Kid Bailey's 1929 recording of the same piece, *Rowdy Blues*. When he heard the latter recording, Bankston noted: "Me and Willie both played that one." Ledell Johnson's wife Mary said of the same record: "Will Brown—it sounds just like him—that's the same way he played. I mean, it *is* him. If he named 'Kid Bailey', I'm tellin' you, he learnt right from Willie—he sure did!"

Though highly regarded in Drew, Brown posed no threat to Patton's general popularity. "Charlie was known throughout this country...more than Willie was," Sara Garrett noted. "...He just go along with Charlie and play, you know...The best musician was Charlie: he was better all the way: a singer and a guitar-player, too."

The evidence of Kid Bailey's and Tommy Johnson's impressions of Patton's music indicates the relative amateurishness of local blues-playing a la Brown and Bankston. As rendered by these imitators, Patton's themes become artless ditties featuring unvarying rhythmic, melodic, and phrasing patterns, devoid of spontaneity or subtlety.

Bailey's *Rowdy Blues* may have been a regionally representative rendition of *Pony Blues*, but it is more like a caricature of the latter than a specialized arrangement of it. It is executed with a bland guitar touch and offers such a sketchy accompaniment that it sounds as if the back-up instrumentalist (who offers bass fills) is actually playing lead. It is phrased as a stereotyped twelve bar blues, squeezing *Pony* within a "ten/six" phrase pattern. Melodically, its three vocal lines are all but interchangeable, particularly as the same tune fragment (involving a dominant, major sixth, and minor third) appears twice within each phrase (from beats three to five and seven to nine). Moreover, Bailey uses identical dynamics in singing each phrase: he boosts his volume on its first two beats, and again on the seventh and eighth beats. These aspects of *Rowdy Blues* work to give the piece a monotonous sing-song quality. As a singer, Bailey is relatively insipid: whereas Patton's delivery of *Pony* spans over an octave, Bailey's melody ranges only a sixth. It employs four basic notes, as opposed to the seven contained in *Pony Blues*. Finally, Bailey and his accompanist produce less intricate rhythms than Patton achieves as a soloist.

Tommy Johnson's treatments of Patton's material are on the same uninspired level of *Rowdy Blues*, a fact that his rich baritone voice tends to disguise. The phlegmatic *Bye Bye Blues*, an eleven bar arrangement of *Pony*[26], converts the latter to a 1-2 square dance rhythm, amateurishly ending each vocal phrase on a weak beat.[27] It features no lead guitar variation and would fail to pass muster as a solo guitar accompaniment, as Johnson (who works in tandem with Charlie McCoy) confines his picking to the top two strings of his instrument. The last half of its last two vocal phrases is melodically and rhythmically identical, creating the same sing-song effect of Bailey's rendition. The vocal melody is likewise less rounded than that of the title verse of *Pony Blues*. While Patton's tune begins by ascending from the keynote to the major sixth, Johnson's simply hovers at the keynote over the first measure. Johnson and Bailey both crudely caricature the ascending-descending melodic motion of Patton's first phrase, singing a half-catch involving two ascending notes followed by two descending ones.[28]

Though Johnson may have been employing the limited devices of Dick Bankston, his conversion of *Maggie* into the routine twelve bar blues that is *Maggie Campbell* betrays a similar lack of musical imagination. While he toys with its vocal melody (ending the first phrase, which is extended to fourteen

beats, on a minor third and the second on a major sixth) he treats it as a fixed vocal, venturing none of the variations of *Screamin' And Hollerin'*. The rhythmic banality of Johnson's accompaniment is indicated by its gratuitous repetition of accenting patterns. The IV chord of the second vocal phrase is accented identically over two measures (as Patton's is not), while an eighth note bass figure that accompanies the first phrase is repeated both in the final vocal measure of a stanza and in the instrumental measure that follows it.

The basic difference between Patton and the musicians who skimmed his musical surface is that the latter were content to work in terms of formulas. There is an obviousness to their music that makes it effortless to grasp. It is house "frolic" muzak that demands a ready audience for its meaningless musical message. Patton's music asks more of its listeners. It also gives them more.

The Art Of Charlie Patton

"He wanted it set up right."—Booker Miller
on Patton's attitude towards music.

Prior to Patton's emergence the Mississippi blues musician appears to have been basically a semi-anonymous figure, entertaining but not engaging a public. Ernest Brown said of the Sunflower County bluesmen of his (and Patton's) youth: "There'd be in them times guitar-pickers...they wouldn't hardly ever hire (one). One play a while; 'nother'd play a while, an' they just...got (paid) a little drink a whiskey—wasn't nothin' to it." It was Patton who managed to have "people just clownin' over him— they'd follow everywhere they heard tell of where Charlie Patton was..."

In the process of becoming the Delta's first blues celebrity, Patton was able to impose his own themes upon an audience that catered to performers strictly as request musicians. As Booker Miller recalled: "We'd play whatever the people request...We'd go out and play for a dance..they'd say: 'Play something,' 'play this,' 'play that!' Well, see, you're out there for the public...mostly you're requested, see?"

Even when Patton was at the peak of his popularity in the late 1920s, Miller recalled, audience tastes ran to three of his tunes: *Pony Blues*, *Down The Dirt Road*, and *High Water*. In addition, his *Banty Rooster* and *Spoonful* were popular repertoire pieces. Patton doled out these works repeatedly, his individual productions lasting, Son House said, "at least ten minutes or better." Almost all of his other excursions were filler pieces or attempts to spark a demand that either proved temporary or never took hold with listeners.

In the process of corraling an audience Patton developed two styles of entertaining. One was a daytime street singing style designed to induce Saturday shoppers to patronize his coming performances at barrelhouses or house "frolics". On these occasions he would advertise his musical wares, and announce forthcoming engagements to interested passersby. Mandy Whigham, who saw Patton work in this capacity, said that such blues performers did not extend themselves as street singers, but ventured a few songs as a means of letting prospective patrons "know what they could do". As a street minstrel, however, Patton was a flamboyant show-off; as Ernest Brown noted: "...he do

most of his clownin' with a guitar on a Saturday on the streets, 'cause the people would give him money just to see him clown..."

Some of Patton's entertaining stunts were musical rather than gymnastic: "He had the guitar 'sayin' it's prayers' and all that kinda stuff," Frank Howard reported, "say the Lord's Prayer."

While serenading an eight hour dance Patton was more boisterous and less frivolous. The style of "hard blues" for which Booker Miller remembered him reflected the sense of the modifier as "tough, indomitable, given to, or characterized by, violence..."[1] His performances were infused with an air of turbulence and truculence: while hitting his guitar, Ernest Brown reported, he was given to quip: "This is the way I beat my woman!"

For the most part Patton expressed his "hard" blues ambience by means of driving music. According to Willie Moore he rarely spoke between songs. It was only when whiskey dictated his behavior that he began "clowning" at dances: "...When he get to drinkin', that's when he start to clown," Ernest Brown said.

Whether his antics enhanced or detracted from his musicianship is a matter of opinion. "Charlie Patton could *play*, but at times he done more clownin' than he did playin'," Brown remarked. "Talkin' about comical, yes he was, and I liked it, too," Booker Miller said. "When it come down to that, you couldn't beat Charlie."

Because Patton's livelihood depended strictly on his ability to furnish a dance beat, the foundation of his music lies in its accenting patterns. The melodies, phrasing patterns, lyrics, chords, or intervals of his particular songs are less significant:[2] ultimately it did not much matter to his audience what genre of music he played, so long as it was danceable. "They're for dancin', those blues we were playin' back in them days," Booker Miller reported. "You had to put them in a time where they could dance."

When Patton began his career black dance music was for the most part mired in the lifeless 1-2-3-4 pulse Dick Bankston used for his adaptation of *Pony Blues*. This rhythm pattern was used for black square dancing and obviously entered black music from the field of white country music, where it predominated. It was basic to the works of Henry Thomas ("Ragtime Texas"), a Texas dance musician born in 1874[3], and was the prevalent beat scheme employed in both spirituals and secular "rag" ditties, such as *Careless Love*, *Make Me A Pallet On The Floor*, *Stack O'Lee*, *Nobody's Business*, and *Come On Around To My House, Mama*. It was also the beat of non-generic tunes like *Drunken Spree* (a piece Skip James heard between 1907-1909), and of such seemingly early blues as *Old Devil*, (Bo Carter's version of the *Shimmy-She-Wobble*, played at Bolton, Mississippi in 1907), and *That's No Way To Get Along* (a tune Robert Wilkins of Hernando, Mississippi began featuring around 1912).

Patton appears to have been the first or one of the first guitarists to make the 1-2-3-4 pulse a basic component of his music. Virtually all of his secular recordings depended on it. He may have been the only musician of his time to actually convert music to a 1-2 beat, as he did in arranging *Spoonful*, and the spirituals *Jesus Is A Dyin' Bed-maker* and *You're Gonna Need Somebody When You Die* (the conventional versions of which used a 1-2 beat.)[4]

The shift from the 1-2 to 1-2 beat that Patton's music embodies entailed a basic revolution in dance rhythm. How confusing and difficult this newer beat scheme proved for some dance guitarists is indicated by Frank Stokes' 1927 rendition of *Crump Don't Like It*, a version of W.C. Handy's *Memphis Blues* (1912), which took its sixteen bar pattern and basic melodic scheme (AABA) from spirituals or *Careless Love*. Stokes plays a sixteen bar instrumental opening with a 1-2 beat; when he vocalizes the song with a 1-2 pattern, his guitar falls silent, except to play fills between vocal phrases. Evidently Stokes, an oldster born in 1887, was unable to transpose the chords of the song to fit a syncopated beat scheme.

It was Patton's immersion in a syncopated beat scheme that enabled him to express his great rhythmic gifts and makes his music suitable for modern listening. Had he favored another beat scheme (such as the square dance pattern), his music would lack its percussive impact. Unlike the 1-2 pattern (which survives in Latin dance music such as the samba and salsa), the 1-2 pattern has proven enduring in American music: first associated with piano ragtime music, it resurfaced as the basic beat of the 1930s' "swing" music that usurped Dixieland jazz, and is currently used in disco music.

The derivation of this beat scheme is conjectural. While early nineteenth century minstrel songs (such as *Turkey In The Straw*) toyed with syncopation for two or four measures, full-blown syncopated songs were unknown in popular music until 1895-1896, when Ben Harney (a vaudevillian from Louisville) scored successes with *You've Been A Good Old Wagon but You've Done Broke Down* and *Mister Johnson (Turn Me Loose)*. These were not dance tunes, and seem to have had little effect on popular music: even during the ragtime era, fully syncopated songs remained a novelty. Only three black vocal tunes of known pre-1910 currency used the 1-2 pattern: *Poor Boy/My Bucket's Got A Hole In It* (the medley Gus Cannon learned in Clarksdale at the turn of the century), *Hesitation Blues* (which Leadbelly dated to around 1907), and *Alabama Bound*, an eight bar ditty Jelly Roll Morton claimed to have written in 1905, and which was first copyrighted in 1909 by Robert Hoffman of New Orleans, who presented it as a piano instrumental theme and labelled it a "Ragtime Two Step". So far as is known, none of these songs had a revolutionary impact on subsequent black music.

In Patton's lifetime dance music played a much smaller role in pop music than it was to do in the decades after his death. Vocal dance music was virtually nonexistent in the realm of white music. The prevailing dance music of the 1920s was instrumental Dixieland jazz, which used a ponderous 1-2-3-4 beat. The vocal dance music Patton performed lay so far afield from recognized dance music of its time that even his discoverer H.C. Speir was unaware that he and other blues singers arranged their songs for dancing, remarking: "You can't hardly dance by...old Negro Delta blues."

Only three of the 40-odd secular titles Patton recorded were not expressly designed for dance presentation: the slow-paced *Mean Black Cat*, a probable studio concoction that emphasized lyrics, *Poor Me*, a ditty of vaudeville derivation Patton treated primarily as a melody, and *Frankie and Albert*, which (like *Poor Me*) used a dance beat but was executed with a light guitar touch. Judging from the lack of vocal and instrumental variation in these performances, Patton did not play these songs frequently.

Dance music was so fundamental to Patton's mode of presentation that he arranged all of his spirituals with a heavy dance beat. His rousing double-time rendition of *I Shall Not Be Moved* was more danceable than most secular music using the same beat scheme. Patton either played gospel music for "sanctified" gatherings where dancing was allowed, or was so immersed in the dance idiom that nearly everything he played translated into dance music.

In all likelihood he categorized his material in terms of its designated dances rather than assessed it with labels like "blues", or "rag" or "breakdown", which are descriptive of their phrasing patterns or intervals. The slow tunes he rarely performed were all designed for the Slow Drag. Material he performed at a medium tempo (like *Rattlesnake Blues* and *Joe Kirby*) was designed for the Shimmy or One Step (also called the "Turkey Trot"), which enjoyed a national vogue between 1910 and 1915, when it was associated with Tin Pan Alley "ragtime" songs. As done in the Delta, this dance alternated forward and backward steps. The uptempo music that Patton performed more frequently was designed for the Shimmy and the Two Step, which alternated two forward steps with two backward steps and was probably derived from the white Two Step, a product of the late the nineteenth century that came into vogue as the result of John Phillip Sousa's *Washington Post March*.

Patton's dance orientation shaped the entire character of his music. His accenting patterns altered his diction to the point of making it barely intelligable: to make his lyrics scan according a 1-2 pattern he would often smother syllables or stress inessential words ("Hitch *up* my pony", "Jackson *on* a high hill", "Just like *a* rattlesnake," "Way down *in* Lula", "Green *Riv*er"), and inessential syllables ("Hel*lo* Cen*tral*"), as well as add syllables ("ri/ider" in *Pea Vine*) to words.

His willingness to subvert his diction for the sake of upholding an accent pattern exceeded that of any other dance singer, and contributed to the success of his songs as dance pieces.

Patton's resourcefulness as a lyricist was no doubt impeded by his dance musicianship, for his audience was not concerned with the words of his songs. As Son House said of Louise Johnson's performances: "...She'd say anything, just so's it's something for the guys to dance off and do the old Two Step...Didn't make no difference with them what she was saying. All they want to hear: the music..." For the most part Patton seems to have devised songs with only a memorable opening couplet, or to have sustained a theme for two initial couplets, as if working on the premise that his audience was unlikely to listen to his lyrics beyond that point.

Like other blues musicians of his era, Patton established his dance accenting patterns with his voice, stressing beats by sudden increases of volume. This approach gives his music an old-fashioned cast: in modern dance music, a vocalist has more freedom because a percussion section bears the burden of establishing accents. Patton's use of more rudimentary rhythmic tools imparted a staccato delivery to his singing and required him to establish a high volume level without straining his vocal resources, so that abrupt rises in volume were possible to effect.

As a dance singer, Patton had no peer. His skill in using his voice as a percussion instrument is such that he makes every accented beat firmly felt; even when he accelerates in tempo he never blurs an accent. Blues singers who lacked Patton's vocal strength (such as Walter Rhodes) had to sing at higher levels than were comfortable for them to make themselves audible to audiences: because they were already extending themselves in the process, their stressed beats lacked articulation.

The most impressive aspect of Patton's artistry as a dance singer lies not in his raw power but in his varied delivery. Many dance blues (such as Skip James' *Cypress Grove Blues* or Booker White's *Shake 'Em On Down*) have a monotonous sing-song quality because the singer basically intones at two volume levels: one for stressed beats and one for unstressed beats. Within even the most restrictive scheme Patton achieves enough variety of attack and dynamic fluidity to make his sound engage the ear as well as the feet.

Yet there is no doubt that Patton's subservience to rhythm patterns crimped his expressiveness as a singer. In the first two vocal phrases of *Circle Round The Moon*, for example, Patton takes advantage of the presence of an accompanist and uncharacteristically sings without regard to an accenting pattern. He achieves a much freer dynamic pattern and more varied vocal attack than he would attain on *Green River Blues*, which set the same melody to a strict accenting pattern.

Patton's recordings employed three basic accenting schemes. He applied a strict 1-2 pattern for a great variety of pieces played at different tempos and featuring different phrasing patterns:

A. *Secular Songs*

1. *Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues*
2. *Banty Rooster Blues*
3. *It Won't Be Long*
4. *A Spoonful Blues*
5. *Pea Vine Blues*
6. *Tom Rushen Blues*
7. *Going To Move To Alabama*
8. *Green River Blues*
9. *Jim Lee Blues* (Parts One and Two)
10. *High Water Everywhere* (Part One)
11. *Elder Green Blues*
12. *Heart Like Railroad Steel*
13. *Mean Black Moan*
14. *Hammer Blues*
15. *Frankie And Albert*
16. *Dry Well Blues*

B. *Spirituals*

1. *I'm Goin' Home*
2. *Lord I'm Discouraged*
3. *Jesus Is A Dying Bed-Maker*
4. *You Gonna Need Somebody When You Die*
5. *Troubled About My Mother*

The 1-2 pattern remained current in the 1920s and was employed in such works as Papa Charlie Jackson's 1925 recording of *Shake That Thing* (the first blues dance hit) and the Mississippi standard *Roll and Tumble*. The structure of blues lent itself favorably to this pattern, which worked to emphasize the final beat of a ten beat blues vocal phrase, and the fourth beat and sixth beats of the ensuing instrumental riff, which invariably involved the tonic chord. However, it was the most demanding pulse to sustain, thanks to its increasing dynamic level during the first two beats of a measure. A small-voiced singer like Jackson who trafficked in this scheme often faded during a measure, weaken-

ing the second accented beat to such an extent that his songs had a 1-2-3-4 feel. Patton's renditions of this pattern are so forceful by contrast that his songs often sound as if they are in 2/4 time.

In some songs, Patton sustains notes too long to convey an uninterrupted 1-2 accenting scheme. By virtue of holding notes on the fourth or sixth beat, he weakens the sixth or eighth beat of a ten beat vocal phrase. (Other songs declaimed with a shouted delivery, like *Moon Going Down* and *Bird Nest Bound*, contain silent sixth beats.) It is notable that the first three songs of this collection represent Patton's most percussively ambitious instrumentation, and it was likely by way of compensating for the percussive weakness of their vocals that he added depth to his accompaniments.

1. *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*
2. *Down The Dirt Road Blues*
3. *Pony Blues*
4. *When Your Way Gets Dark/Magnolia Blues*
5. *Circle Round The Moon*
6. *Rattlesnake Blues*
7. *Devil Sent The Rain*
8. *Joe Kirby*
9. *Mean Black Cat*
10. *Moon Going Down*
11. *Bird Nest Bound*
12. *Stone Pony Blues*
13. *34 Blues*
14. *Revenue Man Blues*
15. *Jersey Bull Blues*
16. *Love My Stuff*
17. *Poor Me*

Though more numerous than his straightforward 1-2 tunes, these works amount to six diverse vocal themes: six of them (*Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*, *Moon Going Down*, *Bird Nest Bound*, *Revenue Man Blues*, *Jersey Bull Blues*, and *Love My Stuff*) are arrangements of *Maggie*, while two others (*Joe Kirby* and *Devil Sent The Rain*) are based on the vocal part of *Maggie*. Two of the songs (*Rattlesnake Blues*, *Stone Pony Blues*) are versions of *Pony*, and one song (*34 Blues*) is a remake of *Dirt Road*.

Patton also used the 1-2 scheme to supplement other patterns, as in singing the chorus of *Some Of These Days*.

The three other accenting schemes Patton used were all peripheral to his work:

I. 1-2-3-4 (accenting the first beat of a measure)

1. *Shake It And Break It*

Though a few blues musicians used this scheme in rendering blues material, Patton applied it to a single work, an embellished "breakdown" that lent itself to this pattern because it employed chord changes at the beginning of each measure.

II. 1-2-3-4 (accenting the first and third beats of a measure)

1. *Hold To God's Unchanging Hand* (appearing on *Prayer Of Death, Part Two*).
2. *I Shall Not Be Moved*
3. *Hang It On The Wall*

Although Patton was able to effect this pattern with great forcefulness, he generally disdained it: his only secular recording that used it, *Hang It On The Wall,* was a re-make of *Shake It And Break It,* with more emphatic third beats.

III. 1-2-3-4 (accenting the second beat of a measure)

1. *Runnin' Wild Blues*
2. *Some Of These Days*
3. *Some Happy Day*
4. *Some Summer Day*
5. *Oh Death*

This pattern became basic to the early 1950s blues of Howlin' Wolf. In Patton's time it was used for white One-Step dancing: it was featured in the Mississippi Sheiks' *Sittin' On Top Of The World,* a song for white presentation whose originator Walter Vinson categorized it as a One-Step piece. Patton used it for his own version of the song, *Some Summer Day,* and for three songs of apparent white derivation (*Runnin' Wild Blues, Some Of These Days,* and *Some Happy Day*) all knit from single measure phrases.

The governing principle of Patton's guitar playing is his vocal accenting: his guitar work basically serves to amplify an accented vocal beat, to radiate a vocal accenting pattern during a musical "break", and (in unsystematic 1-2

songs) to strengthen a weak vocal beat. The guitar insertions that Patton offered between vocal phrases typically involved full strumming in order to achieve maximum volume: except when using bottleneck technique, his picked single string insertions most frequently occur within the vocal line they accompany. Aside from the one chord *Bo Weavil*, Patton's guitar provides a continuous complementary beat of its own on only two recordings—*Shake It And Break It* (which begins with seventeen instrumentalized bars) and *Runnin' Wild.* Neither of these works are blues; the unwieldy phrasing of blues songs all but precluded the use of continuous accompaniments.

The leading role of Patton's voice was an inevitable by-product of the acoustic guitar he played. "I don't remember one song he played, without vocals at all," Booker Miller said. In its ordinary setting, unadorned guitar work would not carry well enough to provide dance music. For example, the hometown house "frolics" that Skip James (a much lesser name) serenaded in Bentonia, Mississippi generally drew between thirty-five and fifty people: like other such events, they were held outdoors in a hosed-down dirt yard.[5] The Memphis barrelhouses he frequented would typically attract between fifty and seventy-five patrons.

As a dance musician, Patton played with great forcefulness; his plucked treble notes often had the power of strummed chords. The purely percussive nature of Patton's guitar styling is indicated by Booker Miller's reminiscence that he sometimes dispensed with accompaniment altogether at dances: "...I seed Charlie get up and when the juice got high enough...I see him just thump his guitar—never touch a string—and they'd jump, man, they'd *jump*!"

Hayes McMullen also recalled this technique: "...Patton played for dances like I did...There's plenty a things we'd be playin' for a rest...'Fore we'd get to playin', to get us started, sometimes we'd be pattin' on the box, you understand?"

What makes Patton a great artist is not his forcefulness in rendering blues dance music, but his refusal to respect the abiding limitations and conventions of his genre. He is the only recorded blues dance musician who characteristically and deliberately brought elements of drama, surprise, spontaneity, and subtlety to his work.

Alone among his peers, Patton thought like a composer and arranger. His unique integration of contrasting vocal and guitar rhythm patterns in *Maggie* and *Pony* attested to the attention he gave to compositional aspects of his music, as did his unparalleled use of small rhythmic motifs in such songs as *Down The Dirt Road* and *It Won't Be Long.* In the former work he completes the guitar phrase that follows its first two vocal phrases with two beats of syncopated tonic chord strumming. Four strokes are played, the first and third

on off-beats. He transfers this rhythm pattern to a IV chord sounded during the third and fourth beats of the second vocal phrase. He uses the same technique of juggling an accent with another two beat figure on *It Won't Be Long*. This motif, involving two eighth notes and a quarter note, is played on the fourth and fifth beats as successive minor thirds (fretted with a bottleneck on the top string). An instrumental bridge beginning on the thirteenth beat of a line reiterates this rhythm pattern with bass work, this time with a single minor third followed by two tonic notes. The subtlety of these transpositions (which a listener is likely to feel rather than notice) is completely alien to the sphere of dance blues.

Patton's exalted sense of arrangement is further indicated by his various ways of dismantling or disrupting the cliched "ten-six" phrasing pattern, which imparts an overall banality to the blues idiom. He uses three methods to alter this conventional pattern. The first of these could be called the "vocal overlay" technique: it involves holding the final word on the tenth beat of a vocal phrase, so that it cascades into the follow-up instrumentation, which thereby loses its otherwise tacked-on quality. While the instrumentation begins on the conventional eleventh beat, it is not readily anticipated because the vocal phrase appears unfinished when the instrumental one begins. Patton applies this technique most dramatically in *Pony* and *Down The Dirt Road*. He uses it in the more modest form of two beat vocal overlays in *Green River Blues*, *Banty Rooster Blues*, and *It Won't Be Long*, where an interpolated word ("baby") supplies the extra beats. In singing the stanza-ending phrase of *Jim Lee Blues*, his vocal overlay variously amounts to four and six beats.

The second method by which Patton dismantles the stereotyped blues phrasing pattern could be termed the "guitar cut-in" technique. This technique involves moving up the phrase-ending instrumental segment by a beat so that it begins simultaneously with the last vocal beat, or final word of a vocal phrase. It likewise works to obscure the conventional separation between the blues vocal and follow-up guitar phrase, and with it, the tacked-on quality of most blues instrumentation. Patton uses the "cut-in" technique in the first two phrases of *Down The Dirt Road*: a descending guitar riff is launched on the tenth beat, and lasts five beats, instead of the conventional measure. It also occurs in *It Won't Be Long*, where a three note bottleneck riff begins on the tenth beat, and in *Banty Rooster*, where three beats of open string bass tonics are employed, the first beginning on the tenth beat.[6]

The third way in which Patton breaches the ordinary blues vocal/instrumental barrier is simply by abolishing it. He either disrupts his vocal line with a guitar figure, or perpetuates a guitar figure that accompanies a vocal phrase beyond the duration of the vocal, as in playing the descending bass riff of

Screamin' And Hollerin', which extends two or three measures beyond the vocal it accompanies. A later version of *Maggie, Bird Nest Bound*, all but obliterates the conventional blues vocal/guitar separation. Its first phrase ("Come on, mama...") ends unexpectedly after six beats, when it is dislodged by a snapped single string guitar figure that had begun on the third beat. This figure amounts to two measures. In the second verse of the song he evicts the vocal after six beats with a descending bass line that continues for ten beats.

Patton applies this "eviction" technique to the second verse of *Pea Vine Blues*, creating a seven beat instrumental interlude that is virtually the same figure he would use on *Bird Nest Bound*. It also occurs in the fourth verse of *Heart Like Railroad Steel*, in which his vocal phrase is suddenly amputated on the sixth beat. An impromptu-sounding guitar figure Patton had launched on the second beat usurps the next three beats, thus taking on the dimensions of a two measure phrase. The same figure (actually a single measure phrase, given a repeat) is then reiterated for three instrumental measures before Patton plays a I^6 chord. He resumes singing twenty-three beats behind schedule.

Patton appears to have been the only dance musician of his age who worked with novel phrasing patterns, instead of blindly regurgitating a formula pattern. He was able to make these alterations of the blues vocal line because he intuitively apprehended its two part character as a cluster of six and four beats. He also recognized that his vocal and guitar lines were part of a single percussive continuum: serving the same ends, they were actually interchangeable.

Most of Patton's phrasing variations were departures from the standard blues phrase. A novel phrase pattern is inherent in only two of his songs: *Mississippi Bo Weavil*, and the 12 1/4 bar *When Your Way Gets Dark*. The latter piece begins with an amputated six beat vocal phrase that is followed by an unexpected instrumental measure based on a high-register tonic chord. Patton then completes the delayed vocal phrase by reciting it over the eleventh and twelfth beats:

> When you way gets dark, baby...
> "Turn your lights up high"

An unorthodox eleven beat bottleneck figure, capped with a conventionally fretted six beat bridge, follows a repeat of the tonic riff. The result of these excursions is a tune that is almost a new species of blues: half instrumental and half speech/song.[7]

Another aspect of Patton's arrangements that removed them from the sphere of ordinary dance music was his ability (unique among recorded blues guitarists of any stripe) to improvise guitar figures behind his singing. His

guitar-playing abounds in such terse snippets, which meshed flawlessly with the singing they accompanied. "I've seen him playin' that guitar an' that guitar sound like it just talkin'," Ernest Brown recalled. "...Look like them strings sayin' what he said."

Patton's general attempts to make his guitar-playing suggest his vocal accenting gives underlying unity to such diverse pieces as *Mississippi Bo Weavil, Shake It And Break It, Elder Greene, Some Of These Days,* and *Pony Blues,* none of which have anything in common as song types or resemble each other in terms of sound.[8] Patton does not resort to a conventional blues gimmick of artifically making his guitar appear to "talk" by molding his singing to mesh a prefabricated guitar figure: he makes his guitar playing actually follow his varied vocal inflections. Some of his figures are completely impromptu. In the second verse of *Joe Kirby,* for example, Patton begins to emulate his vocal accenting with a guitar roll on the top two strings while singing the last two words of the two beat phrase "Kirby blues ain't bad." Apparently recognizing that he can expand this riff, he concludes the couplet with a roll that begins two beats earlier (on the seventh beat) that highlights the words: "Joe Kirby blues". On his recording of the "rag" ditty *Elder Green,* Patton concentrates on capturing the rhythmic nuances of the fifth and sixth bars — the only measures of the piece that are sung consecutively. When Patton begins this section (which involves a melodic descent from a minor third to a minor seventh) he sounds uncertain as to how to proceed. By the sixth stanza he follows his singing ("Lord an' get sloppy drunk offa *Bottle an' Bond*") with rhythmic and melodic exactitude.

Patton's method of accompanying a song in this fashion demanded a great output of creative labor. The accompaniment that resulted varied within a song, and was so individualized it could not be applied to different songs. His ability to mimic his vocal nuances required an extremely elastic right-hand playing technique. To make his instrument "talk" he used no set technique: such figures might be played as notes within a chord (as in *Shake It And Break It,* where Patton isolates notes while playing F, F^6, and C^7 chord positions), as single string treble figures, or as part of a strummed guitar figure (as in *Screamin' And Hollerin',* where open string work accompanying his descending bass mimics his vocal accenting). For the most part he "talked" with unpredictable filigree figures, lasting for one, two, or three beats.

The ability to make an instrument "talk" was idealized as a mark of black musical excellence long before blues were developed; in 1832, the work of black fiddlers in Maryland was commended thusly by a slave: "'twas jes' de same us ef de fiddles wus er speakin'".[9] Although isolated blues feature this mode of arrangement, only two recorded bluesmen besides Patton appear to

have taken a real stab at developing a "talking" guitar technique: Henry Thomas of Texas and Peg Leg Howell, a Georgia street singer. Both of these musicians were gauche instrumentalists by comparison to Patton, and often attained a faulty melodic correspondence with their singing. Patton's use of this technique is so artful that it makes his guitar a genuine voice, just as his voice is a genuine musical instrument. It is particularly astonishing when one considers how difficult it must have been for Patton to hear his own playing in the midst of a noisy dance crowd.

Patton's guitar playing is animated by three other exotic features. Whereas most Mississippi blues guitarists tuned below concert pitch, Patton's guitar is invariably tuned from a step to a step and a half above concert pitch. His fondness for piercing pitches is further seen by his upper register bottleneck work: the eerie b^2 he captures while playing the tonic chord of *Bo Weavil* and the c^3 tonic chord he plays on *When Your Way Gets Dark* (during beats seven and eight and thirteen and fourteen, just before and after spoken interjections) and as part of the seven bar instrumental introduction of *Jesus Is A Dying Bed-Maker.* Sounding these tones required him to reach well beyond the exposed frets of the twelve fret guitar he played, even in a higher tuning.

Another exotic feature of Patton's guitar-playing is his affinity for accompanying his singing with guitar rolls, which he was able to effect because he picked with three fingers. While guitar rolls are rare in blues-playing, they abound in Patton's accompaniments, usually in the form of two or three beat treble licks, which are not evocative of banjo or mandolin-playing, or Flamenco guitar work. Though he generally places them at the beginning of the second vocal phrase of a stanza, he has no rule for dispensing them, and even climaxes two vocal phrases of *Banty Rooster* (in the last line of its third and fifth stanzas) with tenth beat triplet bass rolls. While Patton tends to introduce a roll as an accompaniment variation, he makes rolls a regular part of *Banty Rooster* (as treble figures on the third and fourth beats of the second phrase), *It Won't Be Long, Hammer Blues,* and *Tom Rushen.* The accompaniment of *Pea Vine Blues* is largely dependent on tripet treble rolls that move rhythmically and melodically with his voice. The second verse, for example, uses three such segments: a three beat roll beginning on the second beat of the first phrase, and two beat rolls sounded on the sixth beat of the second and third phrases. These rolls make for a unified accompaniment, as the instrumental bridge that sets off each vocal phrase contains triplets on the first and third beats. Double-time guitar rolls are fundamental to the presentation of *Some Of These Days,* where they occur over the last three beats of the second measure, and recur in the sixth vocal measure.

For the most part Patton seems to have played rolls to enliven the rhythm of slow and medium-tempoed pieces. They also provided a means of fracturing the IV^7 chords conventionally heard at the beginning of the second phrase of blues songs, a notably stagnant rhythmic section that is often played in terms of a fixed chord position.[10]

Unlike his high bottleneck pitches and guitar rolls, Patton's exotic guitar-slapping was generally recognized as one of his musical badges: "...Beatin' that box to death—he never stopped beatin' on that box!" Booker Miller said while listening to a Patton recording in 1969. Actually, he uses this gimmick more sparingly than the guitar roll: it is a regular feature only of *Down The Dirt Road* and the musical descendents of *Maggie*, and in both instances it is heard during a single vocal phrase. The episodic "box beating" heard in *Pony, Banty Rooster, Mean Black Cat*, and *Hang It On The Wall* attests to Patton's general fondness for this device. More noteworthy than his guitar-thumping per se is the fact that he combines it with picking: as Ernest Brown said of his live performances: "He slappin' the guitar, but he be makin' note while he slappin' it."

In order to perform this seemingly uncopyable feat, it was necessary for him to play guitar without anchoring his pinky to the box, and to dispense with fingerpicks. By playing without picks Patton was further able to attain a varied touch, to achieve much tonal variety, and to give his accents sharper definition with episodic string snapping and damping (sometimes performed simultaneously). Listening to *Down The Dirt Road*, where Patton damps most of the figures he plays behind his voice, Miller said: "Man, you don't hear a guitar string, do you? Ha! That guy! You don't hear a *damn* string ring, 'cause he ain't lettin' 'em ring."

For a dance musician Patton played with singular tonal subtlety. In the single measure riff of *Green River*, he was able to suggest the sound of two guitars by brushing a tonic chord and bending the third string (to sound an augmented fourth) while the chord was still reverberating. Miller noted: "Now you watch...he starts slurrin' them strings: you see, he makes double chords. That's what makes you think it's two boxes."

Of Patton's overall playing, Miller said: "I haven't found a musicianer yet or heard of one hardly to imitate that man. That man was different from mostly anybody I heard pick a guitar."

Much of Patton's uniqueness as a guitarist was occasioned by his unmatched, unteachable facility for mimicking his voice, and the fact that he played in no generic style. His playing involves diverse techniques, textures, and sounds. It is in vain that one listens to his music for a set approach or a specific pattern of picking.[11] The only Patton arrangements that can be termed a reflection of stylized musicianship are his performances of spirituals, which he per-

formed Hawaiian-style with a fretting gadget, interspersing fretted notes on the two highest strings with open string tonic chord strums. Most of his other bottleneck-style works were played in the upright position, Booker Miller noted: "I ordered a Gibson guitar: they sent me a bar. And Charlie Patton, he showed me how to play with that bar, but he liked the bottleneck best." The "bottleneck" he employed, Miller said, was "a piece of brass, you know, like a pipe, and it was cut off to just fit his finger: he'd slip it down on his finger."

Even listeners who did not recognize Patton's merits as a guitarist were forced to concede that his singing was extraordinary. "That's what helped put him over, too," Willie Morris said. "He sung real good..." Sleepy John Estes regarded him as the loudest singer he ever heard.

Other than the mock crooning that accompanies *Shake It And Break It*, Patton employed no special singing devices or gimmicks. Miller said of him: "He just flatfoot sing. Now he'd *holler* (shout at full voice), sometimes." His delivery is conspicuous both for its volume and varied, unpredictable dynamics.

The intervals Patton employed probably held less significance for him than his pitches, which he used to create dramatic feeling. One of Patton's most striking vocal traits is his tendency to strive for the highest note he can attain in a given song. In this respect, Patton's vocal delivery resembles that of modern "soul" singers. For his part, Patton used heightened pitches to impart a sense of urgency or desperation to an utterance. The highest pitch he sings on recording is a^1 (about a second beyond the ordinary baritone ceiling), a tone that launches three verses of *Spoonful*, where it functions as a major third. He hits the same pitch at the beginning of the final verses of *Stone Pony* (where it functions as a minor third) and *Revenue Man* (where it functions as a minor seventh). On all of these occasions Patton's voice breaks; his difficulty with this pitch leads him to clip his delivery of it. Patton's voice is likewise strained at the Ab^1 just beneath it, which he ventures in the opening verse of *You're Gonna Need Somebody When You Die* (as a minor sixth) and avoids for the rest of the song.

For practical purposes Patton's range extends to g^1 (the next lowest pitch on the spectrum). He sings this tone at a full shout in two songs pitched an octave beneath it, *Rattlesnake Blues* and *Green River*, where it is heard at the beginning of the third verse. He also employs it as the dominant on *High Water Everywhere, When Your Way Gets Dark, Some Happy Day*, and *You're Gonna Need Somebody When You Die*, all of which are pitched at middle C. Patton takes similar advantage of the nearest adjacent tone, $f\#^1$, which occurs in *Pony Blues, Shake It And Break It*, and *Dry Well Blues* (all pitched an octave beneath it). The same tone occurs as the frequently heard fifth of *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues, Moon Going Down, Revenue Man Blues*, and *Bird Nest*

Bound, and as the once-heard fifth of *Banty Rooster Blues* (in its third verse). The same f#^{1} is also employed as the augmented fourth in *Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues* and *High Water Everywhere.*

Patton's voice loses some of its strident power when he ventures a step below middle C (b°), but loses neither resonance nor expressiveness in the octave that runs between middle C (c^1) and c°. His voice attains peak mellowness within this octave, which is where he pitches the root tones of such songs as *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues* (b°), *Pony Blues* (f#°), and *Down The Dirt Road* (d°).

Just as Patton liked to work the highest notes he could reach into his songs, so did he pitch some songs as low as his voice would allow. He thus situated *Banty Rooster* at B° (a ninth below middle C) and used Bb° as the keynote pitch of *Pea Vine Blues* and *It Won't Be Long.* These were tones he could only deliver at diminished volume, and the low register of the three songs gave them a somber and almost sepulchral sound, which Patton accentuated by drawing out the final note of his phrases. The same dark quality was manifest in *Jesus Is A Dying Bed-Maker,* the keynote of which is pitched an octave below middle C (c°).

Patton also liked to mine the depths of this octave while singing tunes with keynotes situated at or just beneath middle C, such as *High Water Everywhere* (c^1), *Moon Going Down* (b°), *Bird Nest Bound* (b°), and *Devil Sent The Rain* (b°). On these occasions he dropped an octave to sing the last word of a phrase as a variation, the lowered keynote sounding like a grunt, as though Patton were disgusted. He used the same phrase-end octave drop in songs set a fifth beneath middle C (g°) as well: *Joe Kirby Blues, Mean Black Cat, Mean Black Moan,* and *Frankie And Albert.* The G° he succeeded in scraping from the very bottom of his register in this fashion had a hollow, speech-like sound.

Patton sometimes employed a similar octave drop while singing dominants during the last line of a stanza, at which point he then wriggled his way up to the keynote pitch. The dominant of the last phrase of *Dirt Road* begins as a° and ends as A°; that of *Move To Alabama* drops from c#^{1} to c#°. These tones, too, have an unmusical, speech-like quality.

Patton inverted this device to give a climactic sound to some phrase endings. Whereas the verses of *Frankie And Albert* employed G° as their keynote, the chorus was completed an octave higher. By avoiding such gyrations in pitch Patton gave some of his tunes a placid air that complemented their lilting melodies. He avoided his low Bb in *Tom Rushen,* which was sung in the key of Bb, and avoided his low grunt-like G in *Green River Blues, Jim Lee Blues, Runnin' Wild Blues,* and *Some Of These Days,* all of which are sung in the key of G. By the same token, Patton generally applied an even instrumental touch to these songs, which probably served as rest pieces.

In Patton's early blues-singing days he probably sported a vibrato, for he uses it fleetingly in Part One of *Jim Lee*:

> I lay my head in a feeble woman's arms
> An' she lay her nappy head in mine.

While the Patton who recorded in 1929 was doubtless a far more advanced musician than the Patton who offered many of the same pieces in 1910, years of shouting had doubtless taken their toll on his voice in the interim. So, apparently, did smoking. "He smoked a whole lot," Son House said of him. "...He just *kept* cigarettes in his mouth." Before beginning *Spoonful* and after singing the fifth verse of *Jim Lee* (Part One) he can be heard clearing his throat, and his voice, whether singing or speaking, had a congested, rheumy sound. "Just like you hear him singin', he had a growl in his voice," Booker Miller said of him. "...He just didn't speak clear; 'right'...He just never did cut a word clear..." Johnnie Mack (who knew him from the early 1930s) said of his singing: "He didn't have a good clear voice." By the time of his last recording session in 1934 his voice had appreciably deteriorated, and he had to strain to hit his high F#.

A Squabblin' Scuttlebub

I have been a good provider, but I believe
I have been mislead. —*Revenue Man Blues*

The unusual qualities of Charlie Patton's music suggest that his was an unusual blues career, particularly at its onset when the basic direction of his music is likely to have been fixed. Even in later years when Patton was known to have depended on the same performing outlets as other Mississippi bluesmen, he cut a musically independent figure. "...He was kinda selfish about playin' with other guys," Son House said of him. "He always liked to play more by himself. That's the way Charlie was. He didn't care much about buddies." Whereas the other Mississippi dance blues that came to be recorded in the 1920s were easily adapted to ensemble presentation, most of Patton's front-line pieces were not. His basic repertoire contained only a single such piece, *Banty Rooster Blues*, which was phrased in the conventional mold of Mississippi dance blues and was slow enough to readily accomodate an accompanist. The fact that Patton had already produced a novel take-off on this piece in the form of *Down The Dirt Road* by 1910 indicates that he had basically parted company with the house "frolic" entertainers of his neighborhood at that early date. So, too, did his contemporary version of *Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues*, a song that would have been nearly impossible to accompany on either guitar or violin.

The showmanship for which Patton was noted as early as 1910 suggests that one of his significant early career outlets was the minstrel show or the medicine ("doctor") show, which used entertainers as a lure to dispense patent medicines.[1] These traveling troupes were essentially poor man's vaudeville productions with commercials offered in the form of windy speeches by the show's operator, a pitchman who purported to be a doctor and touted his goods between the appearances of his performers, who were put on a weekly salary and expected to have a retinue of antics. The running quips of *Banty Rooster* (which Patton sang in 1910) similarly suggest an early association with such shows, as does Millie Barnes' report that Patton played with his previous wife, Roxie Gibson, before she was to marry him in 1908. A banjoist and guitarist would have made an unlikely combination at a house "frolic", and the banjo had no known currency as a blues dance instrument. On the other hand, the

Tennessee-based show of "Doctor Blackhawk", a fake Indian whose troupe frequently toured the Delta, used a guitarist and a banjo player, and sometimes featured a drummer and trumpeter.[2]

Patton's fundamental affiliation with the barrelhouse of the town, the city, and rural sawmill is intimated by his music and the nuances of his lyrics. Though his *Green River Blues* (recorded at his second session in 1929) cannot be formally dated, it is likely that this song was a reflection of youthful traveling to a remote barrelhouse. Its title stanza ("I went up Green River, rollin' like a log") used the unrhymed, twice repeated format that was associated with turn of the century black song and uncharacteristic of Patton (of whom Son House said "he could make his verses rhyme pretty good"). The place it invoked, a sawmill operated as the Green River Lumber Company, had been founded in 1907 on Plum Street in Memphis by an Indiana lumberman, Addison Boyd Nickey.[3] He located his mill in a community known as Green River on the outskirts of Lake Cormorant, which bore a "little old stream" of that name, Elizabeth Moore recalled. She noted: "...They made lumber there, and they had what I call settlement houses; camp houses."

Barrelhouses were a stock feature in such sawmill settlements, and were operated by the mill owners themselves as a means of recouping the wages of laborers and inducing the latter to remain content in living quarters that lacked provisions for women or families. They attracted gamblers and urban prostitutes who vied with blues singers for the ready money that flowed on paydays. It was in a sawmill barrelhouse that Skip James had his first encounter with a professional blues musician, a piano-playing "sport" named Will Crabtree, who was lavishly supported by a clique of prostitutes. "I used to say: 'Hot damn! — I ain't gonna be nothin' but a 'sport' like Crabtree,'" recalled James.

Patton likewise impressed Ernest Brown as a "high sport". One of his recordings, *It Won't Be Long*, portrayed a "sporting" involvement with a prostitute who made the rounds of a sawmill barrelhouse in West Memphis, Arkansas known as *Minglewood*:

> I believe sweet mama, sure was 'kind' to me, baby
> She is up at night, like a police on his beat.

Similarly, a barrelhouse pianist sang:

> ...They got some 'bad'-lookin' girls on the street
> ...Them gals get a-plenty a money and
> Walk the street like a police on his beat.
> (Cow Cow Davenport: *That's The Kind Of Girl I'm Lookin' For*: 1930)

Patton's performing demonstrations of "the way I beat my woman" appear to have been his jaded means of impressing others with his success as a "sport" who bore the aura of the "big town" blues singer as depicted by Big Bill Broonzy:

> ...those big town blues players...They went out, dressed up every night and some of them had three and four women. One fed him and the other bought his clothes and shoes.
>
> ...one of these sweet back papas had a woman and if she didn't get enough money for him he would beat her up.[4]

Patton's general imperiousness complemented this image. ("He was a *squabblin scuttlebub,*" Hayes McMullen says of him.[5] "Oh, he was a natural squabbler!") So did the propensity for exploiting women that would lead Son House to recall: "He didn't want to buy things he really need: always tryin' to work on somebody else..."

Even if Patton had no "sporting" inclinations early in his career, his professional musical aspirations fairly decreed a broader exposure to music than was available in the vicinity of *Dockery's* plantation. Our impression is that the youthful Patton had a far less parochial career than such house "frolic" entertainers as Dick Bankston or Willie Brown. He traveled to Lula (eight miles from Helena, Arkansas) a few years before 1908, and it is no doubt symptomatic of the life style he adopted upon becoming a musician that a liason to which he evidently attached importance should be dissolved by a journey to Dermott, Arkansas with "Tee-nicey" Wade. To reach this town Patton and his companion must have taken the *Kate Adams*, a wooden-hulled passenger boat that was to be converted to a black dance hall after getting stuck on a sand bar near Helena around 1919. It ran between Memphis and Arkansas City, a river town fifteen miles northeast of Dermott, and Patton would perform a bawdy song about the *Kate* and its milieu:

> The folks said long 'fore the *Kate* was made
> Arkansas City would be that whore's trade.
>
> The time done come to pass:
> When the *Kate* backs out from the landin',
> she's showin' her 'yas-yas.'[6]

"He'd sing it all the time," Willie Moore remembered.

The woman Patton deserted for the delights of Dermott, Willie Barnes, had replaced Roxie Gibson as his chief romantic interest in 1908, when she was a twenty-one year old resident of *Dockery's*. More than two decades afterwards, Patton seemed to have some lingering affection for Millie, who had since moved to Boyle (where she still lived in 1970) and married a man named Cliff Toy. "He used to do a whole lot of talk about her," Son House recalled. Patton freely blamed himself for the demise of their affair: "He claims it was all his fault; wasn't none of Millie's...He didn't say what the cause (of their separation) was, but he said he was at fault." He further told House — quite falsely — that she was the only woman he had ever married legitimately, instead of by "jumping the broomstick".

It is questionable that Millie was ever more than a broomstick bride. "He didn't never marry her," Sara Garrett insisted. "He just got a child by her...he never did stay with her." (It may have been to cloak his off-spring in respectability that Patton attempted to impress House with the validity of his marriage to Millie Barnes.) Their child, christened Willie Mae but invariably called "China Lu" as an adult, was Patton's only known off-spring. Upon her mother's marriage to Cliff Toy she took her stepfather's surname and remained in the household until she married a man named Johnnie Money in the middle or late 1930s.

When Son House was to visit the Toys with Patton in 1933, he was taken with the "nice hair" and "pretty brown skin" of Patton's daughter, and startled by her open contempt of her wayward father: "...She liked her mother better than she did her father because he didn't wanna do nothin' but run all over the country and play guitars and pick up with every woman he see and have 'em cook for some white folks and slip him out some bread, and she just didn't have the confidence in him that she had in her mother...She wouldn't pay him no attention, just like he wasn't her daddy. She wasn't fond of him much — his own daughter."

Towards her fraternal uncle "Son" Patton, who was then a good friend of the Toys, Willie Mae was less aloof, because (House deduced) "he wouldn't play music and he wasn't a drinker and he just had better ways. See, he didn't do all this ramblin' and drinkin' this corn whiskey and 'kickin' up heels' and things."

The brother House met at the Toys was probably the same one David Edwards would recall as "Ed" Patton, who was likewise a tall, stocky, two-hundred pounder. "Ed was kinda a nice fella," Edwards relates. "...He would drink but he always would stay off to hisself and look and listen; see what was goin' on: he was kinda quiet. 'Son' and Charlie, they was a devil, used to wanna 'clown'...but Ed, look like he didn't go for that." The brother Edwards recalled as "Son" was probably C. Patton, who was the youngest member of the clan

and was to be killed in an accident on *Dockery's* sometime in the 1930s. "He and another boy were playin' with a gun," his nephew Tom Cannon reported. "The gun was loaded, and the gun went off."

Charlie had even less rapport with his brother Willie (who was ordinarily called "Son") than with his daughter Willie Mae. "They couldn't 'set horses'," House says. "He ("Son") didn't like his ways and Charlie didn't like his much." Tom Cannon agreed: "They didn't go too far together; they'd be arguin' with one another...Charlie could out-talk 'Son', and 'Son'd get mad; they didn't get along very good."

"They didn't get along too good," echoed Sara Garrett, who would cast "Son" as the family heavy. "'Son' Patton, he was a big squabbler, and he wanted things to go *his* way...so there it was."

Some fifteen years before House discovered that the pair could not "set horses", their relationship had already become so bitter that Charlie decided to move off *Dockery's* as a consequence. It was because he feared killing his brother in an argument, he explained to Sam Chatmon, that he had decided to try living with the Chatmon household on the *Gaddis and McCline* plantation near Bolton.

Patton's arrival there, which transpired around 1914 or 1915, appears to have been prompted by meeting Ferdinand ("Uncle Bud") Chatmon on *Dockery's*. A bastard son of Henderson Chatmon who was the oldest of the nine musical Chatmon brothers, Ferdinand had been part of the family household until his acquittal in a murder trial held in Bolton around 1910, when he was twenty-five. Fearing repurcussions from the brother of the victim, whom he had shot to death during a quarrel arising from a dice game, he had moved to Cleveland. Then he became a *Dockery's* tenant. "I think he went up there 'cause they said it was good huntin' up there," Sam reported. "He always crazy about huntin' and the woods up there, they said, was forty miles wide...He went up there (to *Dockery's*) and happened up on Charlie Patton there."

It is likely that Ferdinand himself suggested that Patton board with his family as an alternative to living on the same plantation as his brother "Son", and that Patton, perhaps haunted by the prospect of winding up like Ferdinand (who saw ghostly visions of his victim) lept at the suggestion. Whether or not he considered himself kin to the Chatmons, he could hardly have presented himself to them without the encouragement of a family member.

Patton subsequently passed at least a month with the Chatmons. According to Sam he was received graciously by both parents. He could hardly have enjoyed the company of the man he might have considered his true father, for Henderson Chatmon was a stern, forbidding figure. "My daddy, he wasn't the sort to make friends with people," Sam noted. "First thing he'd say: 'I don't

know him.'...My daddy tell you somethin' or other, you better do what he said: he didn't 'play' at'all...He'd just as soon hit you with a stick as he'd hit you with a switch." His wife Liza, on the other hand, was admired for her friendly disposition, and Charlie became so enamored of her that he arranged for his own mother to ship his clothes and belongings to her. "He just thought as much of mama — more I believe — than he did of *his* mama, the way he act...He's just crazy about her, and mama's just crazy about him. Everywhere he'd go, she'd carry him; carry all of us...She'd hitch up her wagon...carry us on picnics and all that. As little as I was, I can remember Charlie Patton and a gang of 'em playin' together."

In Bolton Patton became one of a multitude of blues musicians. "I believe there was more around close to Bolton than there was in any town...when I was small," Sam said.[7] "Anywhere you go, you catch five or six in a pile." Perhaps the most prestigious of the lot was Alec Robinson, an even older man than Ferdinand who played bottleneck ditties like *Pearlee*. "He's about the best, him and Lem Nichols, that I knowed around there in them days," Sam recalled. Both performers served as early mentors to Bo Chatmon who (Sam said) had no enthusiasm for Patton's playing.

Because Patton did not play the kind of waltzes and Two Step tunes then in favor with local whites ("I ain't never heard him try to play n'ar a one of them") he did not accompany the Chatmons when they appeared as a seven-piece string band at white "sociables". Among black audiences of the era he was quite popular, if only by default: "They liked his pickin' better than they did this Alec Robinson there," Sam opined, "cause he's (Robinson is) pickin' with a pocket knife...and they didn't care much about it (i.e., knife-style pieces) in them days."

A jaundiced view of Patton's local stature in Bolton was advanced by Walter Vinson, who later became famous as a member of the Mississippi Sheiks, a duo consisting of himself and Lonnie Chatmon. He held that Patton's appeal was restricted to older people of Robinson's generation: "He just played them two songs, *Pony* and *Banty Rooster*. That was sufficient for old folks back in them times; I used to like 'em myself, 'fore I knew better."[8] Later Patton was to record a surpassing version of Vinson's own signature tune *Sittin' On Top Of The World*, as *Some Summer Day*.

Sam Chatmon noted that besides his two pet themes Patton regaled local audiences with a tune called *Saw A Cow*, a non-blues piece that began: "Mama killed a redbird, and papa cooked the stew." He also took up a local standard called *Rockin' Chair Blues* which had been featured by Robinson and Nichols as early as 1906 and was also played by Ferdinand Chatmon. A Slow Drag version of *East St. Louis Blues*, it contained the lyrics:

> Runnin' down to the river, gonna take me a rocker chair
> If the blues don't take me I'm gonna rock 'em 'way from here.
>
> The Mississippi's runnin' and the Red River goin' dry:
> Sometimes I think my baby oughta be buried alive.

Apparently Patton took up this theme for the sake of "covering" his local competitors and afterwards discarded its lyrics. He made a riverboat the focus of his recorded rendition of *East St. Louis*, which he called *Jim Lee Blues*, and which contained the unrhymed lyric:

> Which a-way, which a-way, do the Red River run?
> Which way, do the Red River run?

He had yet another version of this song: "...*Slidin' Delta*, that's what he called it," Booker Miller reported.[9]

On the whole there appears to have been no give and take between Patton and Bolton's blues corps. Sam said that his half-brother Ferdinand would sometimes "drum" (tap) his guitar in a fashion evocative of Patton, but had a meager repertoire consisting of a few tunes in "Spanish" (open A) tuning, *Rockin' Chair Blues*, and a waltz in the key of A called *Midnight Serenade*. Despite his age he had just begun playing music when his sister Josie left the family household in 1909, and he remained a simon-pure amateur. "He would no more than play for hisself or play for his woman," Walter Vinson said of him.

The expression "stone pony" may well have reached Patton's ears via the Bolton house party circuit some twenty years before he used it to create *Stone Pony Blues*. "They was usin' it around Bolton all the time," Sam reported. "...I can recall when my mama and them used to ride cows to parties and I'd hear 'em say: 'That's a stone pony!'" He defined the sweeping superlative as "a man that wanna be a 'bad' man...or can play a guitar good...he can do most anything, 'ccomplish most anything he started...Anything that was fine or good, they call that a 'stone pony'..." It was probably inspired by the celebrated 1908 Kentucky Derby upset fashioned by Stone Street, a 24-1 underdog, or by a racetrack term for a sure winner, "stone blinder", that came into vogue about two years later in the wake of this victory.[10] Applied to desirable women, the phrase figured in a once-popular Delta blues beginning: "That old stone pony will be my 'fairo' some day," of which Willie Moore remarked: "All of them was

singin' that." The reissue of Patton's 1934 recording of *Stone Pony* was to inspire the name of a Sixties' rock group featuring Linda Ronstadt, The Stone Ponies. Patton seems to have used the term in its restricted application to the opposite sex in order to boast of a girl friend: "I got me a stone pony, don't ride shetlands no more."

It was in keeping with Patton's discreet style of song expression that he did not seize upon "stone pony" as a term of self-description, as another bluesman would likely have done. Only in one instance would he directly characterize himself:

> Just like a rattlesnake I stay, in a mamlish curl
> I ain't gonna have no job mama, rollin' through this world.
> (*Rattlesnake Blues*)

A "rattlesnake in a curl", Son House said, meant a cheapskate.[11] Patton's tight-fistedness would impress both his nephew and House himself, who regarded him as a poor touch for a loan. "...Man, he was *tight* with money," House said. "...Whoo, brother *yeah*. He didn't spend anything much. Charlie sure was 'choicy' about that."

Sam Chatmon thought that Patton eventually left Bolton for Smedes, a small town twenty-five miles north of Vicksburg he describes as "just a plantation with one little store, a flagstop." There he boarded with two of Henderson Chatmon's half-brothers, John and Levi Purvis. For a time Sam received bulletins about Patton from one of the Purvis children: "I'd get a letter from her and she's talkin' about Charlie Patton was there with them, playin' out every night, and I'd answer the letter sayin' I hope he have success. So finally she wrote and said he had moved out there between Leland and Greenwood...'Kellasaw' or somethin' like that was the name of the place. So next time I heard of him he was stayin' out here on Will Dockery's." The town Chatmon could not recall distinctly must have been Kelso, immediately below Smedes, in the southeastern region of the Delta. When asked to explain Patton's departure from the hill country of Bolton, he said: "I figured that he wanna stay up in the Delta, 'cause the folks would have more country suppers on Saturday nights...He'd play somewhere every Friday night and Saturday night; Sunday night."

Once Patton left the hills he would periodically pay his respects to the Chatmon family until Henderson and Liza moved to Memphis in 1927. Although these visits may have been of monthly duration, as Sam recalled, there is no question but that the latter mistated matters (apparently to inflate his prestige as a blues figure) when he later reported that Patton had been "raised" by his

family or was considered to be a Chatmon by blood. His sister Josie had no memory of Patton's presence in the household before she left Bolton in 1909 (when Patton would have been nearly twenty) and did not think he had ever been accepted as a genuine family relative. His younger brother Larry, who was born in 1901, likewise recalled neither Patton's visits nor any family mention of his kinship with them. Walter Vinson, who met the Chatmon brothers around 1916 and afterwards became their closest professional associate, scoffed at the idea that Charlie was related to them.

By 1916 Willie Moore knew Patton as a native of Hollandale, a town some forty miles above Kelso and Smedes he recalled as one of the Delta's prime gambling places. It was probably around this time that Patton, who impressed Moore as a barrelhouse musician who had outgrown the "little short places" that were the province of the house "frolic" entertainer, was offered a slot in W. C. Handy's band. It is conceivable that when Patton visited the Chatmons and their relatives he was already situated in Hollandale, which lay along one of the main stems of the "Dog", a route (nicknamed the "Black Dog") that ran between Vicksburg and Clarksdale, and encompassed the towns of Cleveland, Leland and Rolling Fork. He would seem to have been associated with Hollandale for an extended period, for J.D. Short (a Clarksdale based bluesman who took up music in 1919) was to know him as a resident of a lumber camp on the outskirts of Hollandale, at Mirthy Bow.[12]

By 1918 Patton had resumed residency of sorts on *Dockery's* plantation, according to Sara Garrett, who arrived there that year. That year all of its tenants were treated for malaria by a team of medical researchers from the Rockefeller Foundation, and Patton may have been among them. Half of those examined were found to bear the disease, and as a result of experiments conducted on *Dockery's* the visiting researchers were able to obtain an 80% remission of Sunflower County's malaria rate. As part of their work they administered quinine (half of which was paid for by Will Dockery) to every tenant, and combated the threat of disease-carrying mosquitos by equipping each shack with a screened porch and outhouse, neither of which were then conventional features of plantation quarters. The prevalence of malaria during the period evidently inspired Willie Brown to use it as a metaphor for blues in a song Willie Moore heard him play around Lake Cormorant:

> The blues ain't nothin' but a lowdown shakin' chill
> If you ain't had 'em, I hope you never will.

Malaria was colloquially known as "chills and fevers".

The state of Patton's own health during this period was sufficiently impaired to disqualify him from military service. Although he fell within the eligible age group targeted for World War One duty under the Selective Service Acts of May, 1917 and August, 1918, he was never drafted, according to Sara Garrett. He told Son House that a doctor who examined him on *Dockery's* found him unfit for the army: "He couldn't pass for it...he had a bad heart. He said that's what the doctor told him."

Some planters of the period who had influence with (or helped administer) local draft boards arranged to have their tenants exempted from service in the interests of keeping their work force intact, particularly since 1917 and 1918 were boom cotton years which saw crop prices soar to 29¢ a pound, double their previous value in any part of the century. Some blues musicians managed to wrangle similar exemptions by cultivating influential white patrons. Several Chatmon brothers availed themselves of this expedient through the graces of Harold Stovall, a close friend of Will Dockery who heard them play at a dance in Cleveland around 1917 and subsequently imported them to his own Coahoma County plantation to serve as his personal minstrels. "...He didn't charge 'em a penny for movin' in, and taken care of 'em all through the winter and settled with 'em better than he would the other hands," Sam recalled. "...He'd force the other ones to go and work, but he'd let them sit around, 'cause he wanted to use them playin'." Such musicians, Joseph Dockery said, were known among Delta planters as "white folks' niggers." It is doubtful that Patton ever merited this designation, for he so infuriated Will Dockery that he was banished from the latter's plantation in the winter of 1921. The interlude that follows affords a remarkable glimpse of Patton's relations with white planters and black women.

Frank Howard, a native of Buffalo, New York who eventually settled in the Delta town of Tribbet, reported that Patton was ejected from *Dockery's* by the owner himself and ordered never to return. In a conversation with Howard shortly after this explusion took place, Patton quoted Dockery as having declared him *persona non grata* because the plantation's female sharecroppers "wouldn't half-work; they'd be sleepy all day on account of listenin' him to play at night at different parties." In light of a later altercation with a planter Howard witnessed and the sordid circumstances that preceded it, it is obvious that Patton had glibly contrived an innocuous explanation of his expulsion. Had Patton's popularity posed such a threat to the productivity of *Dockery's* work force, banishing the musician would have offered no solution to the problem, for he could have continued to mesmerize the same tenants by playing in such places as Cleveland or Ruleville. The idea of Dockery suddenly deciding to rid himself of Patton after enduring something like a decade of his guitar-playing (and, presumably, the attendant yawns of his female workers) seems far-fetched.

On the other hand, it is true that the planter had little liking for music (he never hired Patton to play for parties) and that he apparently discharged him at the end of the cotton season, when all hands were expected to be busy. The postwar price slump of 1920-1921 could hardly have raised his esteem for non-productive tenants.

Howard first met Patton while working as a chauffeur for George Kirkland on the latter's 2500-acre *Cottondale* plantation, which he portrayed as a "raggedy flagstop between Ruleville and Doddsville on the Yellow Dog railroad."[13] (The plantation lay about ten miles southeast of *Dockery's* by rail). When he entered *Cottondale*'s "Chinaman's store" (a grocery; the Chinese who had come to the Delta decades previously had since formed a merchant class there) to purchase a box of blue ribbon cigars for his boss, Patton was lounging inside the premises with a guitar slung over his back. "...I got to talkin' with him," Howard recalled, "an' he got in the car with me; went out there to see Mister George."

"Mister George" was tending his own commissary when Howard returned from his errand. The first thing about Patton he seems to have noticed was his guitar. "Mister George asked him could he play that box; he told him, well, the peoples *tell* him he could play, and so, he made a couple songs there. Then he asked him where he was livin' at; he told him, well, he kinda lookin' for a location at the present time."

The obvious hint directed at Kirkland did not pass unnoticed: "...Him and the 'man', Mister Kirkland, went on back in the house...They talk for a while; I didn't hear that." Kirkland, Howard assumed, hoped to induce Patton to stay on the plantation as his personal minstrel: "That was what he had in view 'cause he liked it (Patton's music) hisself."

Once negotiations were concluded Patton met Howard on the front porch of Kirkland's house: "Charlie come on out; he told me, he say: 'Chauffeur there, I think that the boss fella left a message for you.'" The message was to transport Patton's belongings from the "Chinaman's store" to an empty shack on the plantation, in the back of Kirkland's old army truck.

The shack designated for Patton's use had recently been vacated by a pair of tenants who had stayed only long enough to wheedle an advance against their future crop from Kirkland: "The people had borrowed some money, then went off. The house was already furnished when he moved in there."

Apparently Patton was to earn his keep strictly as a musician. Throughout his tenure on *Cottondale*, which lasted from December of 1921 to the summer or fall of 1924, Patton never touched a plough or any other farm implement. Nor was he, to Howard's knowledge, ever asked to.

His debut performance took place during the week of his arrival: "First Saturday night they had a big time. Mister George himself come down; they

had a *great* big time. That was a little bit before Christmas. On Christmas they had a great big time, all during Christmas." The Christmas day affair took place on the lawn in front of Kirkland's house and lasted an entire day and night, attracting most of the plantation's 75-100 tenants.

Over the next three years, none of Patton's one-time colleagues from *Dockery's*, Cleveland, or Drew ever visited the plantation, and Howard never met any of them on the occasions he accompanied Patton to places like Blaine (the next town below Doddsville), "Sunflower City" (officially, Sunflower, about eight miles south of *Cottondale*), and a "straight-out gambling house" in Ruleville known as *Junior Austin's Place*. At *Austin*'s, Patton would sometimes "blow a little harp" (harmonica), but "when he get 'round to 'clownin", he mostly would pick his guitar."[14] He played pieces like *Down The Dirt Road* and *Pea Vine Blues*, "but mostly his song was, if he gonna catch up his pony or saddle up his black mare, he goin' out an' find his woman in the world somewhere." Another song Patton sang "right smart" (frequently) began with the phrase "Smokestack lightnin', bell just like gold," no doubt in reference to a river boat.

In 1923, Howard witnessed a Patton performance with an eighteen or twenty year old guitarist who "frailed 'long behind Charlie" rather than pick an accompaniment. "I and Charlie went to Sunflower City; that's where I got acquainted with him," Howard said of Patton's young partner. The man was named Robert Johnson and told Howard that he hailed from Maud, a town in Tunica County. He was obviously too old to have been the Robert Johnson (born c. 1912) of later Delta renown.

Patton's early days on *Cottondale* were marked by chariness of his new surroundings, and attested to the fact that he was no stranger to trouble. "He said: 'I'm amongst strange people in a a strange place, and I hope it work out; if it don't, I know which a-way to run,'" Howard recalled. He made various pronouncements concerning his desire to create good will. At first he curbed his drinking in the expressed belief that someone might take advantage of his intoxication to draw him into a fight or poison him, a precaution that indicated the basic squalidness of his past career. Once he saw fit to relax this security measure he began to drink, Howard noticed, "right smart". He divided his drinking between a "potion" of moonshine and a bonded brand, *Doug Harper*, which Howard described as "hundred proof whiskey".

While Patton maintained peace with his plantation neighbors, he met with less success at the barrelhouses he frequented. Of the two or three fights between Patton and other parties Howard witnessed, all were provoked by his opponent. "...All of them was fair fights," added Howard, who said that he twice intervened to break them up. The two incidents Howard recalled in detail belie the legend of Patton as a cowardly bluffer, and illustrate either his unwillingness to suffer affronts or his fear of losing face in an unfamiliar environment.

The first occurred at a Patton performance when "a fella's wife had got drunk, went and sit down on his lap. The fella come up there and jerked the chair out from under him. Then when he (Patton) fell down, the fella kicked him. That's where he had done 'wrong': he (Patton) got up swinging for him..." On this occasion Patton "done pretty good for hisself" until separated from his adversary.

Patton next squared off against another belligerent male whose drunken wife had contemptuously ruined his dinner in a cafe. "He bought him a fish sandwich. And a woman come up there, get her another drink; says she want another drink. And knock his sandwich out on the floor.

"And he said: 'Miss, you done knocked down my supper and that's all I got!'", Howard related, conveying the scene in a plaintive tone as if to suggest that Patton expected the woman to offer to pay for his sandwich.

"The husband told him: 'Well, pick it up and eat it, then!' and cussed him."

Patton's response was to bristle with propriety.

"He said: 'Well, you done wrong. Mister, I don't cuss *nobody*!'" The remark was taken either as a challenge or a sign of weakness.

"...The fella throwed another word to him and he shoved him (Patton). When he shoved him he made a mistake, because Charlie knocked him down, the first lick. He got 'bout half-straight and he (Charlie) kicked him; that straightened him out again. And he got 'bout half-straight again. An' when he got kinda half-way up then, he went on crawlin' out the door...He didn't 'study' (contend) with him no more; he had enough."

Another seemingly uncharacteristic episode marking Patton's *Cottondale* interlude was his formal wedding to a woman named Mandy France at a "big" Fourth of July picnic in 1922 held on Oss Pepper's plantation, between Ruleville and the LeFlore County town of Minter City. Following a ceremony officiated by a pastor named Tom Morgan, Patton and Robert Johnson serenaded the wedding guests.

As a long-time, reliable employee of George Kirkland's, Mandy was allowed to draw monthly "furnish" money to cover her living expenses during the growing season, which would usually last between March and September, when a tenant could expect to begin receiving cottonseed money for a crop. The "furnish" money Mandy received was advanced against the profits she would presumably make once her crop was harvested.

Patton dealt with his wife as though she were a prostitute of the sort who attached themselves to barrelhouse blues singers. During the planting season of 1923, Howard said, he began appropriating her monthly advances: "He take the money, go an' drink it up, an' throw it away, treatin' people — womens and so forth like that. Then he come in and give her a whuppin' about it 'cause she

got mad over it." As Patton continued to (in Howard's phrase) "wear her out" with his fists whenever she protested his actions, Mandy Patton found herself unable to provide for the bare necessities of life. Finally she was forced to approach Kirkland with a plea for additional subsidies.

An explanation of the abject circumstances that compelled her to seek this aid prompted Kirkland to declare that he would advance her no additional money until her husband made good on her outstanding debts by working in the plantation commissary. Then he delivered the same message to Patton in person.

At that point, explained Howard, Patton "got a little bit too smart." He derided Kirkland's attempt to involve him in plantation work and bragged that he could make the money in less time by playing music. The landlord's angry response was to banish him from the plantation forever.

In terms of Mississippi law of the period, Patton got off cheaply for his impertinence. Anyone who refused to "give service" to a landlord in order to discharge a debt could be fined $100 or imprisoned six months in the county jail.[15]

Patton's proclaimed aversion to formal marriage arrangements was very likely based on his appreciation of such laws and the implications they held for predators like himself. By "jumping the broomstick" he insulated himself from legal responsibility for whatever debts his female companions accumulated, thanks to his improvidence.

Mandy Patton refused to join her husband in exile, telling Howard and other acquaintances that she "wouldn't go to his bed unless another woman walked with her." She subsequently reverted to her maiden name and left *Cottondale* to live with her father Charlie Frank, who owned a home near Ruleville.

More than six years after the pair separated Patton was to sing, in the twelve bar opening stanza of *Magnolia Blues*:

> When your way get dark, baby
> —"Turn your lights up high!"
> Where I can see my Mandy, come a-easin' (by).

It is anyone's guess as to whether Mandy France is the subject of this obscure couplet.

Patton's vicious treatment of Mandy France raises the possibility that some variation upon the shabby scenario he enacted at *Cottondale* lay behind his expulsion from *Dockery's*. Sara Garrett recalled that on one unspecified occasion a woman with whom he was living grew so fearful of his physical abuse that Will Dockery himself was forced to go to their shack to retrieve her belongings

when she decided to leave him. "They said he was awful cruel," she reported. His sister once stated that he kept a bullwhip to punish women with[16], and Sara said that his assaultive behavior enmeshed him in periodic trouble on *Dockery's*: "When he would mistreat his wife, then the agents would sure get on him—not only him, but any of the men, if they know you doin' it without a cause..." Such concern was largely prompted by the fact that women were valued as a labor commodity on Mississippi plantations, often more than men.

In later years Patton failed to cut this sinister figure, either because he modified his behavior or deteriorated physically. Son House said of him: "He'd try (to beat females), but he'd come out behind the eight-ball most of the time. He'd get whupped hisself, 'cause he's so weakly..."

Frank Howard remembered that Patton made a trial return to *Dockery's* in the spring or summer of 1923 which lasted only until its owner learned of his presence: "...He found out that he was on the place, and sent him word to get off up there, and don't let him sing. Then he went to Helena; Helena, Arkansas."

Patton set out for Helena in the company of Howard's own sister, a *Cottondale* cropper named Athie Johnson. Upon returning to the plantation, she told Howard that Patton had suffered a near-fatal gunshot wound at the *Hole In The Wall*, a well-known barrelhouse located on Mississippi Street. "She said he was in serious condition," remarked Howard, who was never to see Patton after his confrontation with Kirkland.[17]

Patton's wounding might account for Hayes McMullen's observation that he "kinda hopped" as he walked, a peculiarity that Booker Miller also noted: "He kinda stepped funny on his legs...He kinda dragged one of his legs...He didn't use his left leg like he did his right." While Son House took Patton's faulty stride to be an imitation of Charlie Chaplin's splay-footed shuffle, Patton himself told Booker Miller that his limp had been caused by a gunshot wound.

At this point in his life, Patton could no longer pretend that knowing "which a-way to run" would rescue him from trouble. His facility for making enemies had caught up with him, and he must have been disheartened by his predicament, which resembled his bleak self-assessment in *Joe Kirby*:

> Just like a doggone rabbit I ain't got no doggone den
> Oh I been in trouble Lord, ever since gals been.

Merigold, two train stops north of Cleveland, became Patton's "den" in 1924. There he took his sixth known "wife", Minnie Franklin, who seems to have been a better conniver than Patton himself. Viola Cannon recalled that she relieved him of $900 and a .45 pistol (which Patton might have equipped

himself with as a consequence of being shot) when she deserted him, causing Patton to chase her to Vicksburg to recover his property. When interviewed in Bovina (a suburb of Vicksburg) some four decades after this event, which occurred in 1924, Minnie made a convincing figure of respectability. She recalled Patton more readily for his drinking than his musicianship, and ventured the opinion that he had died of alcoholism rather than heart failure, as she had heard.

Patton somehow managed to persuade Will Dockery to rescind his banishment, and in 1924 took up quarters on the plantation with a woman named Udy, whose sister (a woman named Sudy) was married to one of his brothers. They lived on the northwestern side of *Dockery's* near Kimball's Ferry on the outskirts of Merigold, and Patton remained a familiar figure in the latter town over the next five years. "He was the only blues singer up in this section of the country. It sure was something having Charlie here," recalled a local companion, Sam Manifield.[18]

Indeed, there were no other blues singers on *Dockery's* at this time, and it is doubtful that Patton had any regular local associates. His old playing partner "Tee-nicey" Wade had taken up residence in Tutwiler in the mid-1920s; Wade's reputation apparently loomed small in the Delta, although Booker Miller (who saw him around Tutwiler and Alligator in the 1930s) considered him good enough to record. By 1927 Will Brown and his wife Josie had left Drew for Memphis, where both were to die (according to Dick Bankston and Ledell Johnson) around 1940. Bankston counted himself and a crony from Drew named Jim Halloway as having played for local house "frolics" and picnics until "the year of the high water" (1927), but neither could be termed an associate of Patton's. While Tom Cannon saw Will Brown play with Patton, he never saw Bankston on *Dockery's* plantation, while Leroy Willis, who frequently saw Patton in Drew, Doddsville, and Ruleville before moving to Lula in 1927, never saw Bankston, Brown, or Halloway.

"A musicianer, he's not got as many men friends as he has women," David Edwards once observed. "The only men friends he has is other musicianers, near about." Unlike most of the Mississippi bluesmen of his time, Patton seemed to have made no lasting professional friendships to speak of by the mid-1920s. When Son House became acquainted with him the various musicians Patton had known took a distinct back seat to the subject of the various women he had known. His sexual encounters formed practically the sole extent of his serious conversation.

"You couldn't hardly get a word in edgeways yourself, not when Charlie's around," House reported.

"...The whole thing he'd talk about: his woman yesterday, the day before yesterday...all what he done to the woman, 'goin' with her and all that."

"Yeah, he's *good* at that...He'd be talkin' about the time he's 'with' her, they goin' to bed, and how long they can 'stay', and all that...

"It'd make Willie (Bill Brown) so mad! 'God damnit, what in hell! Shut up, you lappy-eared son-of-a-bitch!'

"I said: 'Bill, don't talk about him that way! Let him 'lone.'

"'Oh, I get *sick* of that son-of-a-bitch!'"

The Myth Of Willie Brown

"I would say me and Little Willie
Brown played more like Patton than
anybody I know." — Hayes McMullen

Charlie Patton's most celebrated accompanist and Delta rival of the Twenties already disparaged him as a sixteen year old, over a decade before the two recorded together for Paramount Records. "You know Charlie *talked* loud; that make Brown...not devoted to him so much," a teenage companion, Willie Moore, sheepishly recalled. "...Charlie Patton, you know, he's a rough man: if he get mad he go to fightin'. Willie Brown say he wasn't fond of him much because he would argue."

Were blues-playing a simple personality contest, Brown would have surpassed Patton among Delta audiences. "They liked Brown better than they did Patton," Hayes McMullen notes, "'cause Patton would argue so..." McMullen himself regarded Brown as "a very nice guy," adding: "Willie Brown was very friendly; I ain't never knowed him to 'clown' (act boisterous)." On McMullen's part this personal esteem did much to foster an opinion that Brown was a better guitarist than Patton, whom he did not like. Similar cronyism led Son House (who recalled that he and Brown were "like brothers" in the Thirties) to the same conclusion, which he argued as though the point were one of personal honor: "...Willie Brown could play any piece that Charlie could play and play it better than Charlie...He's way better, *twice* better than Charlie..."

McMullen and House neither appreciated nor approached Patton's abilities, and their criticisms of his musicianship were patently disingenuous. House's propaganda on Brown's behalf glibly explained Patton's greater popularity in terms of histrionic showmanship, with which Brown, he insisted, refused to demean his music. Yet his depiction of Brown as a strait-laced performer was a misrepresentation. For his part, Brown was not above flagrantly misrepresenting his influence on Patton, of whom House would say: "Lotta them songs he sing...he got them from Willie Brown...The one about *High Water*...He got the song from Willie, the music; the beat of the music. But Charlie, he added the words about 'high water everywhere'. It was the same thing...Willie called...*The Jinks*...Willie told me." As Brown could not have been more than ten years

old when Patton played a parent version of this piece (he was born on August 6th, 1900, his death certificate states) he could not have inspired Patton's rendition. While his influence on Patton must have been negligible, Patton's influence on his repertoire was considerable, and Brown seems to have made a determined effort to specialize in playing Patton pieces.

Though basically a local attraction, Brown was an important musical figure in the Delta for at least two decades, and became the best known of Patton's sidemen. He was one of the few blues guitarists to devote a career to accompaniment, a role to which his weak voice virtually relegated him, and it was this circumstance that wedded him to Charlie Patton. When the two were not feuding, they were exceptionally close. "Them mens just like two sisters or somethin'," Ernest Brown said of them. "...Look like they really loved one another."

His full name, Willie Lee Brown, was never used by acquaintances. "Instead of 'Willie', they called him 'Bill'," Leroy Willis reported. "Everybody called him 'Bill.'" Hayes McMullen says: "I called him 'Little Willie' Brown," a nickname Mandy Wigham of Swiftown would explain accordingly: "They mostly would call him 'Little Willie' Brown. He was low; Willie was lower than Charlie...He (Patton) wasn't no size, but 'Little Willie' wasn't big as Charlie."

"He's a little bitty old guy," Willie Young said. "They called him 'Little Bill'." Frank Howard noted that Brown stood around 5'4" and weighed 135 pounds, while his one-time neighbor Elizabeth Moore adds: "Willie Brown didn't hardly weigh over a hundred and thirty-five...that was his size."

Brown's features were as unprepossessing as his physique. By the late 1920s, his face had grown so wrinkled that it looked like a maze of "little ditches" to Elizabeth Moore, and his lips were flecked with "'bright' places", probably the mark of a pigmentation deficiency known as vitiligo. His eyes watered constantly from a near-sightedness he never bothered to correct with glasses, and the mustache he affected, Son House says, grew "on poor soil". He was dark complexioned and uncouth, at least in making pronouncements on color: "...He had a whole lotta them old rough songs, you know," Ernest Brown recalled, "'Your mother was a teddy, an' your sister was a bear: your daddy was a monkey 'cause he had 'bad' hair.'"

Brown's death certificate lists no birthplace, but he was likely born near Cleveland, not far from *Dockery's* plantation. He was living on Arthur Peerman's plantation just northeast of Cleveland when Ernest Brown arrived there as a tenant, apparently between 1905 and 1907. "Willie learnt in Cleveland," said Brown, who credited Earl Harris (Patton's own acknowledged mentor) with teaching him guitar. "Willie Brown worked on Mister Arthur Peerman's, but when he learned how to play music...he quit workin'," Brown reported. In

view of this age, this transformation likely occurred no earlier than 1914. It was probably not long after Brown learned to play that he left Peerman's: "Willie Brown stayed there to my knowin', I reckon about seven-eight years," Brown said. His departure from Peerman's can thus be dated between 1912 and 1915. Though Ernest Brown thought he moved from Peerman's to Robinsonville, he might have spent a brief period on *Dockery's* plantation, for he was to tell Son House that Charlie Patton taught him to play guitar there. Brown's statement can be taken to mean that he acquired such pieces as *Jinks* and *Pony* from Patton, and could indicate that he did not know how to pick a guitar accompaniment before meeting Patton.

By 1916, however, Brown was no longer in the vicinity of Sunflower County. That year an eighteen year old Willie Moore moved from Tunica to the Bedford plantation a few miles west of Lake Cormorant (locally, "Lake Carmen") and became his neighbor. "He was sixteen when I got 'quainted with him," Moore reported.

Moore soon became Brown's drinking companion, which proved to be a full-time occupation: "...He say he didn't, you know, drink so much whiskey...but look: he drink it, man, just as sure as you born to die! And whenever you hear him slappin' that guitar, he been *had* some, too..." Drinking and playing guitar, in fact, were Brown's abiding life-long pastimes: "He wouldn't shoot no dice, play no cards, no sir! There's one thing I know him to do — two things — he drink whiskey and play that guitar. After he had done got that whiskey he'd go to that guitar, man!"

Over drinks Brown also tended to become expansive about his past, within the desultory limits of plantation conversation. "Sometimes when we would be drinkin'," Moore related, "...he might say: 'Man, I used to live down in Shelby! I lived such-and-such a place for years!'" He told Moore that he had arrived at Bedford by way of Shelby, a Bolivar County town which numbered 645 persons in 1910 and stood fifteen miles above Cleveland on the *Dog* line. Before living in Shelby, he told Moore, he had lived in Cleveland. In another conversation, Moore recalled, "he told me he had some fella he used to play with down the road; he told me, 'twas a fella stayed down here in Hollandale. And he said: 'Man, you oughta hear him play!' Said: 'Me and him plays together!' He's talkin' about Charlie Patton!"

Owing to Brown's sedantary life-style, his association with Patton from 1916 onward was episodic. "All the time I knowed Willie Brown he lived at Lake Cormorant," said Moore, who lived in the same area until the mid-1940s. Brown would pay brief visits to Cleveland and nearby Boyle around 1920, but otherwise, Moore noted, "never did go down there after I got acquainted with him." He remained on various local plantations until 1952, when he passed a three month

interlude as Son House's neighbor in Rochester, New York. Becoming homesick, he returned southwards to die on a plantation six miles east of Tunica in January of 1953.

There seems to have been no compelling reason for Brown's lengthy attachment to Lake Cormorant, which lies about twenty miles below Memphis (then four rail stops away) and derived its name from the four and a half mile lake adjoining the town. Though it never mustered as many as a hundred residents or merited incorporation, Lake Cormorant impressed Moore (a professional gambler) as a prime gambling and night-life spot.

The quality of stodginess that forms our main impression of Brown's character had already asserted itself in adolescence, when (in 1917) he received a notice to report to Hernando for an army physical. "He asked me what did I think about it," said Moore, who received a like summons. "I told him, I say: 'I imagine I wanna go 'cause I ain't never been to France.' He say: 'I'll tell you the truth: it's a risk to run.' That's what he said about the war."

Once drafted and bused to Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg (one of the army's chief mobilization centers, housing nearly thirty thousand trainees) with Moore and a non-singing Bedford mandolinist named Mack Evans, Brown found his physical examination too much for his senses. "They shot that boy, shot Willie Brown with them 'three cs', and knocked him out...And we was intendin' to compose a song about it (the army) afterwards, but Willie Brown says 'Damn the song!' 'cause the needles hurt him so bad...He stayed ill around seven, eight days; then he got to feelin' all right..." Although Brown and Moore entertained fellow draftees with their music on the Saturday night of their arrival in camp, their army careers lasted only two days: "Both our class cards came on a Friday, and peace declared that Sunday mornin'," Moore said.

During the war years Brown's career ranged between DeSoto and Tunica County, and his chief musical sidekick was Moore, who accompanied him on guitar. "I played 'second' to Willie Brown all the time," Moore recalled. "...Sometime we'd split it half-way: I'd play lead a while and he play lead...Sometimes he'd sing and sometimes I'd sing." Their personal friendship appears to have prompted this partnership in the same way that Brown's distaste for Mack Evans' brother led to a musical rift between them: "Willie Brown said him and that boy's brother couldn't get along: he was through with him. I forget his brother's name but everybody called him 'Poochie'."

Brown's musical alliance with Moore took them to dances at "Tunica City" (Tunica, a town twenty miles below Lake Cormorant with a population of 955 in 1920) and to a jukehouse on the "Dog section" between Lake Cormorant and Clack Station (later, Clacks) operated by a man named Killraine. "He had a woman off this 'Dog section'," Moore said. "In 'eighteen he got that

woman...Jim Smith was goin' with that woman and Willie Brown married her...She was a nice-lookin' brownskin woman. Look like her name was Cora."

Although the musical sounds Brown would project on his 1930 recordings were already basic to him when Moore met him in 1916, most of his early repertoire never reached a recording studio. "His main piece was *Old Cola,*" said Moore, who identified the song as Brown's rendition of *Pony Blues*. According to Moore, Brown played it in "cross-note" (open E) tuning, the same tuning Son House used in playing the *Pony Blues* he derived from Brown. It contained the lines:

> Wake up old Cola, with them four white stockin' feet
>
> The blues ain't nothin' but a low-down shakin' chill.

The title verse may have been suggested by a proverb; it was said of horses:

> Three white feet, sell him for a friend
> Four white feet, keep him to the end.

Another teenage effort, *Red Bell,* dealt with what Moore called an "instruction" or "reprobated" woman:

> Heard a mighty rumblin' under the ground:
> Lord it was Red Bell, turnin' around.

"...Red Bell was a bad woman about killin' the people, just raisin' sand, and just slappin' mens bottom-sides up," Moore explained. "Couldn't no man do nothin' with her...She's just as 'bad' as a woman could be." Rather than an actual person, she may have been a black descendant of the Bell Witch, a noisy evil spirit whose legend flourished in Mississippi and Tennessee in the early nineteenth and twentieth century.[1] Like *Rocks and Gravel,* a Brown piece of similar vintage that began "Rocks and gravel, make a solid road," its musical content remains indeterminable.

A fourth early Brown effort was *Make Me A Pallet On The Floor,* a square dance "rag" song chestnut he recorded for the Library of Congress and one that Moore first heard in 1910 as rendered by a Tunica string band headed by a middle-aged man named Joe Sercie. "I'll tell you another song he played," Moore said. "*Poor Boy Long Ways From Home.*" The presence of this bottleneck staple in Brown's repertoire discredits Son House's claim that he did not play

bottleneck style, as does Hayes McMullen's recollection of his 1920s' performances of *Roll and Tumble*.[2]

House's description of Brown as a deadpan entertainer who disliked Patton's demonstrative and frivolous performing style does not hold with Moore's account of Brown's approach to performing: "...He stomp his foot, barefooted...he say: 'Give me that *Pony*!'...Slap that guitar, boy, back there, say: 'Set it over yonder!'" His wife Elizabeth recalled Brown's ability to play guitar behind his head, a favorite Patton stunt. Ernest Brown, who was to become re-acquainted with him in Robinsonville in the mid-1920s, responded to him as a humorous entertainer: "He could think of some of the funniest words look like to sing than anybody I know." Like Patton, Brown made his percussion more emphatic with violent foot-stomping: "His feet sound like two-three feet was dancin'," Ernest Brown said. "He just kept his feet goin' right with the music. He carried so much racket till anybody wanna dance...they sure would dance, 'cause Willie Brown give 'em a dancin' number." He also gave them Pattonesque patter, at least as he accompanied other musicians: "He'd be secondin', an' laughin' an' talkin' an' turn his head off (i.e., look elsewhere)...an' that fella be singin' an' playin' an' Willie Brown be talkin' an' just laughin'...Laughin' an' talkin' an' 'complementin': wouldn't miss a note."[3]

Though Brown mimicked Patton's performing airs and made Patton's most famous piece his own mainstay ("The biggest thing I heard Willie Brown sing about: old 'Saddle up my pony,'" Moore said) he also did his best to come across as something other than a poor man's Charlie Patton. He did not feature most of Patton's songs and did not play Patton's material in a way that reminded Willie Moore of Patton. "He just played his own style all the time," said Moore, who was in a good position to pass on this point, having accompanied both performers. "If he play *with* Charlie Patton, why he played his own style."

Despite Brown's dance musical orientation he took pleasure in the vaudeville blues recordings of the early Twenties, and sometimes went to Memphis to hear them: "He listened to Mamie Smith's records, and *Kate* Smith..." Moore recalled. His exposure to records would be reflected in the first two couplets of *Future Blues*, which paraphrase Ma Rainey's *Last Minute Blues* (1923).

Memphis Minnie, the most famous female blues singer of the coming recording generation, became Brown's close associate upon her postwar arrival at Bedford. "They stayed right close," Willie Moore reported. "...He'd 'second' behind her...She raised at Lake Cormorant. 'Kid' Douglas her name, but she went out on a record under the name 'Memphis Minnie'." Even as a "girl...a woman about eighteen years old," Moore noted, "she could make a guitar 'talk', say: 'Fare thee well!'" When Brown became her neighbor and back-up

guitarist, she was about twenty and at least as experienced as he. Born five miles (and two train stops) north of Lake Comorant at Walls, she is thought to have taken up guitar in 1908, when she was eleven.[4] In 1910 she ran away from home to work as an itinerant musician, traveling as far as Jackson, where she played on the streets. At Bedford's, Moore said, "she learn how to play a piano there, after she learned guitar," learning from "a fella that come outta Walls every Friday evenin' to play for a roadhouse...they called him 'Kid' Crackintine..." Her main instrument remained guitar: "She's a guitar king," Moore held, scrambling metaphors.

Her ability resulted in Moore's own demotion as a backing guitarist: "...When she's playin' with us, she played lead all the time...I'd play 'third'. She'd do all the singin'; when she wouldn't sing, I'd sing, sometime." As often as not, their local audiences were white: "Oh man, we played for all them white folks there in Lake Cormorant...Mister Adams what had that big brick house there, when he didn't get Handy's band outta Memphis, if he's givin' a little light 'sociable' (party) 'round there, we'd play for them: we'd be playin' for all them white folks...Mister Bass and Mister Cox...Mister Blair." They also played for local merchants who used them to drum up black patrons: "We'd be in a store, and the man'd have somethin' to sell: we'd play two-three hours, somethin' like that."

For white audiences Brown played the role of pop musician: "He's playin' for them white folks mostly about *You Great Big Beautiful Doll,*" said Moore, citing a 1911 song hit. "The biggest thing them white folks liked was *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*...That's a waltz." The latter song had appeared in 1910 and subsequently sold five million copies of sheet music. Minnie's favorite pop offering was a more contemporary work popularized by Gene Austin on a 1924 recording: "I'll tell you what she used to love to sing about all the time; she sing about: *What Makes You Do Me Like You Do Do Do?*" At one white party Minnie and Moore serenaded by catching an excursion boat (the *Idewild*) at Lake Cormorant around 1921 the two musicians pocketed $119 by the time they stepped off at Biggs, Arkansas. Though Moore found that "some of them white folks liked the blues better than the colored did," the white outlets Brown and Moore serviced were not particularly lucrative. "I'll tell you one thing: we wouldn't make five dollars that much; we'd get a tip sometimes; sometimes we wouldn't."

Among local black audiences, Moore said, Brown had a larger following than Memphis Minnie, a fact he attributed to her lesser experience: "...He's playin' before she was: she wasn't nothin' but a girl, and he'd *been* playin'." Though Minnie was actually the older of the pair, and was hardly the less experienced guitarist, Brown had been catering to Lake Cormorant audiences

for something like five years when she came to the area, and may have had greater stature by virtue of seniority. Moore considered her Brown's superior as an instrumentalist, and the suggestion that she might have developed under Brown's tutelage brought forth a snicker: "Wasn't nothin' he *could* teach her...Everything Willie Brown could play, she could play, and then she could play some things he *couldn't* play."

Although Minnie offered a version of *Pony Blues*, she was never to record any material that can be associated with Brown or Charlie Patton. She was the first recorded Mississippi dance guitarist to specialize in fast single string picking. To provide amplification she relied on the flatpicked bass guitar of her common-law husband, Kansas Joe McCoy, whom she met in the late 1920s. The origins of this arrangement may lie in her early performances with Brown, who seems to have learned nothing from her own approach to music. Nevertheless, Moore reported that Brown was her local duet partner for five or six years, a span that suggests that Brown had closer professional ties to Minnie than to Charlie Patton. Despite frequent travels ("she'd skip around every which a-way"), she numbered among Bedford's small clan of residents until the late 1920s, when, Moore reported, "she went to Memphis." There she would launch an enormously successful recording career that would last until the early 1950s. Her removal came as a welcome departure to Lake Cormorant's female citizenry, which viewed her as a threat: "They didn't like her, and the men didn't like Charlie Patton," Moore reported.

Brown's working relationship with Charlie Patton during the 1920s seems to have consisted largely of intermittent one-night stands. As he did with Memphis Minnie, he appeared strictly as a back-up guitarist, adding volume to Patton's music and enabling Patton to coast whenever fatigue (or liquor) took a toll on his playing. Brown's dependence on this subordinate role is indicated by House's recollection that he had a solo repertoire of "not over five or six pieces" during their own association, which began in 1930. "Very seldom would he sing," House said. "...He'd sing the *Pony Blues*, and the *Jinks*...But the rest of them, he never did sing much." By the mid-1920s, when Ernest Brown became his associate in Robinsonville, the latter piece had replaced *Pony* as the cornerstone of Brown's repertoire. "That Willie Brown's favorite, the *Jinks*," Ernest Brown noted. Because Willie's voice (which House described as "kinda a rattle") was too weak to be suitable for house "frolics," he was professionally dependent on his ability to "complement" other performers, who probably secured most of his playing dates. It was no doubt Brown's lesser position that gave Patton license to quarrel with him with relative impunity, for Brown was a dispensable part of any Patton appearance.

Son House was to distort the nature of their working relationship by presenting Brown's subordinate role as one he adopted by choice: "...Willie would always do the 'complement', let Charlie lead and he'd do the 'complementing' behind him. He was a great 'complementer'." His estimate of Brown's abilities was nonetheless prevalent among more objective associates. Willie Moore said: "Willie Brown was the best 'complement' man: I ain't never heared no one could 'complement' no better..." Ernest Brown opined: "Willie Brown could near about make a guitar 'talk', secondin'."

Unlike most "complement" guitarists, Brown also made an impact with his solo playing. Ishmon Bracey, who saw Brown and Patton together "up around Indianola" sometime after Patton's recording debut, raved on his behalf: "Yes sir, he could *play* that guitar!" If Patton had any criticism of Brown's abilities, he kept them to himself. According to House, he would play the role of appreciative listener whenever Brown played, to the point of patronizing him by requesting his pet piece, the *Jinks*. "A lot of times we'd be together and Bill...he (Patton) called him 'Bill'..:'Bill, you c'mon, play that piece.'..." House added: "He didn't act like he was jealous; he act like he loved...to hear him (Brown) play."

Otherwise, Patton and Brown were diposed to bicker: "They'd squabble all the time; anytime they'se together and playin' and makin' music," House recalled. Musical disagreements often sparked clashes between them, Willie Moore noted: "Sometimes they'd get to talkin', you know, about what was the *Jelly Roll Blues* played in, or what was the *Down Home Blues* played in.

> "'Man, I know all about it! It's written in so-and-so!'
> "*No*!'
> "'Oh man, such-and-such a thing's written in C!'"
> 'No!'"

Though Patton is generally cast as the villain of these affrays, the two (from Moore's re-enactment) were apparently equally argumentative. Having lost his temper, however, Patton was likely to become personally abusive, as Brown apparently did not. "Willie knowed how he was and Willie wouldn't pay him no attention," House said. "He did a lot of cussing and raising sand, but Willie knowed he wasn't going to *do* nothing..."

From House's account it would appear that Brown was openly contemptuous of Patton's womanizing. "Runnin' with women and things like that, he never did get into it," Willie Moore said of Brown. "...He's *careful* about that." Mandy Whigam of Swiftown found Patton to be the more forward with women: "Charlie was kinda on the 'quick' side, you know, 'fast'—he (Brown) wasn't as 'far-out' as Charlie. Willie was more quieter than Charlie."

On occasion Brown nonetheless affected the raunchy role of "sporting" blues singer, as when Ernest Brown attempted to convert him: "I laughed at him, say: 'Willie Brown, I done got saved an' I done got to be a preacher...You'se with me when I'se *'wrong'*; now I want you to get with me now...I'm a-pray for you.' He say: 'Don't pray for me,' say: 'I got eleven dozen women,' said: 'If you pray for me I don't know what I'd do...I don't wanna quit all the women I got.'"

Despite such flippancy Brown appears to have been a generally humorless man. Blues-singing must have been somewhat oppressive to him, for he was afraid that God would strike him dead with a thunderbolt if he dared play a spiritual. "Craziness, I'd call it," House said of Brown's belief. "Nothin' but silly." His inability to read (and hence preach professionally), to sing professionally, and his unwillingless to work at manual labor no doubt reduced him to semi-dependency on his various wives. He could not have drawn the performing fees of Patton, who paid him as he found fit: "...He's gonna raise sand if he didn't get the biggest (cut)," House said of Patton. "He could out-count Willie and all...bring up some kind of excuse." The best excuse of all to pay Brown lesser rates was that his was the lesser role.

Our first eyewitness account of a joint Patton-Brown appearance stems from 1922, when Patton paid a visit to *Junior Austin's* barrelhouse near Ruleville with Frank Howard. As the pair entered the premises, they found Brown occupying the stage; chomping on a cigar, he sang the piece he called *Jinks* and later recorded as *Future Blues*. Then he played several duets with Patton. "Oh, he's good," said Howard, who found him "not quite" as good as Patton himself.

"He was just as good as Charlie Patton," insisted Leroy Willis, who often saw the pair playing near Ruleville between 1924 and 1926: "They'd be together a whole lotta times. I used to have a uncle...he had a jukehouse out there from Ruleville for a long time, down in what they called 'Big Field'...They played around there for about a year for my uncle—Charlie there always done the singin'."

The suggestion of musical parity between Patton and Brown failed to impress Willie Young, a guitarist who saw Brown play on a Cleveland street in 1928: "He wasn't as good a musician as Charlie. Charlie was the best...I'd rather hear him *anytime* than hear Willie Brown."

Hayes McMullen, who first heard Patton and Brown play in the late 1920s in Tallahatchie County, took Brown to be a better guitarist, an opinion he supported with the false claim that Patton was largely restricted to "Spanish" tuning.[5] "Willie Brown was a better 'note' fella than he was, but Charlie Patton was the leadin' man, you see."

Although Ernest Brown knew Willie Brown better than he did Patton, he did not let cordiality color his vision. "He was over Willie Brown," he said of Patton. "Everybody thought that Willie Brown was over Charlie but he wasn't: Willie Brown couldn't *play* with Charlie. He'd *complement* him...when Charlie Patton'd get tired a-leadin', he'd let Willie Brown play some, an' he'd 'second' behind him."

Thanks to the fact that Patton took Brown to his third recording session (in 1930), it is possible to make concrete comparisons between them. While only two of Brown's solo recordings survive, his claim to solo fame rested largely on the extant *Future Blues*, as he was to call *Jinks*. When Elizabeth Moore heard its opening bass riff (which she described as "draggin' it down" on the guitar) she exclaimed: "That's him to a T!". While its melodic contour suggests the opening verse of *Pony Blues*, the piece is a Slow Drag arrangement of Patton's *Maggie*, Brown having imitated Patton's fretting positions but gone to obvious lengths to make his work sound individual. By snapping each of the four bass notes he plays over the first fifteen beats of the song, Brown supplies a strong rhythmic pulse that is absent from his singing, which extends only a sixth. Its vocal phrasing is mildly eccentric: each line is normally alloted eleven beats.

Listening to *Future Blues*, H.C. Speir commented: "There ain't no comparison between him and Charlie." He could think of nothing favorable to say about the piece, which he dismissed with the comment: "This is a flat style." Careful scrutiny of Brown's accompaniment reveals that Brown was technically cruder and far less inspired than Patton. The bass line he offers is that of Tommy Johnson's *Maggie Campbell Blues*, given a patina of originality by the snapping Patton effects in the initial verse of *High Water Everywhere*. Apart from this single phrase, Brown's instrumental timing is basically erratic, and his instrumentation clashes rhythmically with the singing it accompanies. In the second phrase of each verse he plays single note bass string fills on the third, fourth, eighth and ninth beats. Patton used identical fills in the second verse of *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues* and in the third verse of *Heart Like Railroad Steel* (where they occur in the fifth, sixth, ninth, and tenth beats of the phrase they accompany). Whereas the 1-2 accenting of Patton's fills meshes with his vocal accenting, Brown's equivalent does not, and causes the beat of the song to give way to momentary anarchy. Given the fact that his is a percussive accompaniment with no real melodic figures this lapse is no petty one, particularly since House extolled *Jinks* with the claim: "Charlie could beat him singin', but those beats and things, Willie could beat him on that and he (Charlie) knowed it..."[6]

Despite the fact that *Future* is much slower than Patton's equivalents and was the mainstay of Brown's repertoire, it does not offer a single accompaniment

variation. Its IV chord figure of the second phrase is not only unresponsive to Brown's vocal accenting, but is comprised of two identical half-bar snippets (heard on beats three and four and reiterated on the seventh and eighth beats). By way of further minimizing his accompaniment, Brown's instrumental bridge between stanzas concludes with a half-bar riff he had already played on the last two beats of the six beat figure that set off the second and third vocal phrases.

The fundamental amateurism Brown displays by botching his rhythm and playing out of tune becomes even more apparent when one listens to *Heart Like Railroad Steel*, a tune Patton recorded at his second session. As the only Slow Drag accompaniment Patton recorded in "Spanish" tuning without using a bottleneck, it invites comparison to *Future Blues*. The two songs have several instrumental touches in common, such as the three beat V chord figure Patton launches on the third beat of the third vocal line of each stanza. Brown plays out of the same position in effecting an equivalent figure, which begins on the fourth beat of the stanza-ending phrase of *Future*. Although Patton's recording is in extremely poor condition, the distinctions between his approach and Brown's fairly leap out at the listener. Patton's rhythm is far more flowing and vigorous than Brown's, and his accompaniment (which uses two different figures during its initial vocal phrase) is likewise more varied, more spontaneous, and more responsive to his vocal accenting. His guitar touch makes Brown's sound bland by comparison: he mutes individual bass strings and IV chord figures, while making his strings ring out as he plays V and I chords involving open strings. Though Patton's work contains many more nuances than Brown's, it did not enjoy a similarly exalted position in his repertoire. In fact, it was not even among his regular repertoire pieces: Booker Miller never heard him perform it at any of the dances they serenaded between 1929 and 1934.

Brown's other extant 1930 recording, *M&O Blues*, was obviously derived from *Pony Blues*. It was apparently designed for street presentation, for it is too slow and rhythmically lackluster to have made for dance music. Though his song takes a conventional "ten-six" blues phrase pattern, his instrumental timing is even more erratic than his work on *Future Blues*. He minimizes an accompaniment that is already without variation by using the same five beat guitar figure to accompany the last half of all three vocal phases. His guitar touch is completely unexpressive, a weakness that was probably inherent in his playing of the period, as McMullen and House said that he customarily used a pick on his index finger (House reporting that he "used picks mostly all the time").[7]

The four duets Brown recorded with Patton at the same session affirm Ernest Brown's observation that he was unable to "play" with the performer he supposedly surpassed. All of his accompaniments rely on strumming, with

simple single note bass fills dropped on alternate beats of the second phrase of the blues songs he accompanies. Unfortunately, poor recording quality muffles Patton's lead guitar parts, and makes it difficult to perceive the effect of Brown's presence on his musicianship.

Dry Well Blues is acoustically unbalanced to the point of all but obliterating Patton's playing, and was probably recorded with Brown sitting in front of him. Apparently this torpid One Step adaptation of *Pony* was a concession to Brown. "You know Willie Brown didn't like to play fast," Willie Moore said. "...He liked to play it slow, and if you played any faster, he'd say that was wearin' him out." When Booker Miller heard *Dry Well*, he remarked: "Now that one kinda surprises me: I never did hear him play that slow—he always was fast on it." The song (which was used as the flip side of *Bird Nest Bound* and was not issued for nearly a year after it was recorded) is chiefly interesting as a demonstration of Patton's ability to reshape his own material. It employs a "hollering" vocal style Patton had not featured on *Pony*. Instead of fading out at the end of its phrases in the diminuendo style of *Pony*, Patton typically ended phrases at raised volume. His vocal phrasing was more conventional than that of *Pony*: instead of holding the final word of a phrase for six beats, he held words for a measure or half-measure, sometimes omitting an extension altogether. Its basic ten beat vocal units were given a systematized 1-2 accenting pattern and were formed of conventional "six-four" phrase snippets, which would have been easier to accompany than the more eccentric paired "five-five" clusters Patton sometimes used in *Pony*.

Moon Going Down and *Bird Nest Bound* were renditions of *Maggie* that found Patton performing in "Spanish" tuning and Brown working in standard tuning out of the A position. The success of these works lies primarily in Patton's full-voiced singing and his refusal to make concessions to his accompanist's tempo preference. Though Patton makes them exciting performances, they are not particularly skillful when seen as duets. During the opening phrase of the fifth verse of *Bird Nest Bound*, the guitarists lose track of one another when Patton unexpectedly falls silent on the seventh beat and attempts to remedy his mistake by adding an extra beat to the line. The ten beat instrumental section that follows is essentially an attempt at regrouping.

Ten of the eighteen guitar fills of *Bird Nest Bound* amount to two measures (with five six beat fills and one apparently accidental seven beat fill after the first line of the final stanza), and unorthodox two measure patterns similarly recur in *Moon Going Down*. They appear regularly at the conclusion of the second and third lines of stanzas, and amount to half of the guitar fills heard in the record. The freedom (and in some instances, haphazardness) of Patton's vocal phrasing made this work exceptionally difficult to arrange and execute as

a duet. The phrasing of Brown's accompaniment (which he called *Down The Staff*) was no doubt suggested by the descending bass of *Maggie*, for it took a similar form. Whereas Patton's bass was introduced on the second beat of his singing, creating an "overlay" effect by resuming on the last beat of a vocal line, Brown introduced his treble phrase (involving dominant sevenths) on the third beat. Instead of recurring as the vocal phrase ended, it was thus timed to end simultaneously with the vocal. In the first line of the song, however, Patton, muffs his vocal delivery by dropping out on the eighth beat and adding an extra beat to the line to compensate for his error. On the seventh beat Brown had begun a repeat of his single measure riff, which ended a beat before Patton's vocal. The smoothness with which Brown papered over Patton's blunder by adding an extra strum on the eleventh beat before resuming the riff indicates that he was no stranger to such lapses on Patton's part. In the second verse two such "fake" strums were necessary to balance out Brown's accompaniment, thanks to Patton's drop-outs on the seventh and eighth beats.

While similar drop-outs on the same beats of the first line of the fourth verse were deliberate preludes to a succession of three measure vocal phrases (which reiterated the words "Helena whistle" in a style Miller termed "doublin' back"), the phrasing of *Down The Staff* did not accomodate this variation, which resulted in a twenty beat line. The new pattern caught Brown two beats short. As if to adjust to Brown's inelastic phrase, Patton modified his "doubling back" pattern in the next stanza: its eighteen beat structure allowed Brown to play four *Down The Staff* figures that syncronized with his singing. This stanza contained the only true guitar interplay between the two musicians, with Patton punctuating Brown's accompaniment with snapped bass slides on each beat.

The rollicking tempo of the piece obscures the awkwardness of its phrasing, as does the spoken banter that often follows the second line, which conveys the impression that the musicians are having a lark rather than straining, as they surely were. One imagines that such calculated casualness was indispensable to the success of the Patton-Brown duet, for on record their pairing emerges as a rough-hewn enterprise.

Although Brown's accompaniment on *Moon Going Down* was as ambitious as many lead guitar parts, the label credits for the work indicated the presence of only one guitar. When Booker Miller listened to the record some thirty five years later, he would scoff at the mention of an accompanist. "See, you never heard him play," Miller said of Patton. "Ain't but one (guitar) there — he'll make you *think* it's two. That man's just the king."

Brown's accompaniment abilities are difficult to access on the basis of his duets with Patton, whose playing all but forbade a closely-knit accompaniment. When paired with the more pedestrian Son House, whose regular playing

partner he became after recording with Patton, Brown displayed no real skill to speak of on three Library of Congress recordings made near Lake Cormorant in 1941. The accompaniment he concocted for Fiddlin' Joe Martin's *Uncle Sam Done Called* demonstrates that Brown's reputation for instrumental expertise was utterly unfounded. As a slow paced work featuring four instrumental breaks it provided Brown with an ample forum in which to excercise his talents. His disjointed accompaniment was so erratically timed as to confuse his vocalist. That he was essentially a position player guided by sights rather than sounds is apparent from his faulty harmonic treatment of the chord shape Patton had employed as the IV chord of *Down The Dirt Road*, involving a C configuration (with the dominant of the chord sounded on the top string) moved five frets up the guitar neck. After copying this position, Brown moved it up two frets to act as a V chord. Thanks to its voicing, the chord did not make a suitable prelude to the tonic without the addition of a seventh. Brown's blunder exposes him as a primitive when set beside Patton, whose chord voicings are always correct, even when he departs from blues material.

Indeed, the cronies who created the long-standing legend of Willie Brown were actually posing a contradiction in terms. Had Brown been capable of real ingenuity as a chord player he doubtless would have thumbed his nose at blues in the fashion of a Richard Harney or established himself as a pop musician in the manner of Charlie McCoy. One guesses that Brown was merely the most illustrious of numerous novices Patton groomed as "complement" guitarists in the course of his career.

The mysterious Kid Bailey, who left a recorded legacy of two sides, sounds as though he might have been one such understudy, groomed either by Patton or Willie Brown. He remained so anonymous in his own right that Willie Young merely recalled him as "the other one" who sometimes played with the pair. Listening to Bailey's 1929 recording of *Rowdy Blues*, a duet rendition of *Pony Blues* containing lead guitar work that is basically an embellishment of *M&O Blues*, Mandy Whigham commented: "That sounds just like Willie: I think they kinda copied one another, don't you? Ain't Willie makin' music on there? I think that's Willie makin' music." Son House, who attributed the vocal to Brown, thought the work contained Brown's lead guitar with bass backing provided by Patton. Elizabeth Moore reacted to the record with the observation: "Him (Willie Brown) and Son both could make that 'introduction' on their music..sounds like that music and that voice—pretty close there, if it *ain't* him (Brown)." Mention of Bailey's name drew her response: "...Him and that Kid Bailey made music together sometime, I know...that fella's been with Willie Brown playin' right there at Lake Cormorant: I seed him natural, in person...He'd come in there with Willie, and I don't know where he lived at: I just

knowed they'd be over there to the juke on Saturday night." Brown, in fact, mentioned that he had recently recorded with Bailey, a story she dismissed as fanciful.

Although Bailey's vocal delivery is relatively sedate as compared to Patton's, the melody of *Mississippi Bottom* is based on the same three intervals (the minor seventh, keynote, and minor third) Patton had used in the opening verse of *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues.*

Bailey is likely to have been groomed as an accompanist or intermission performer by Patton or a Patton imitator, and to have gone into business for himself once he acquired his musical lessons. A floater with no fixed base of operations, he acquired none of the prestige that flowed readily to Willie Brown. Almost no Delta bluesman who traveled in his orbit or enjoyed his career longevity remains comparably remote. No informant ever located knew him well enough to learn his proper name or birthplace; typical of their brusque encounters with a man who seemingly cast no shadow in the Delta was Booker Miller's brush with him on Moorhead and Itta Bena streets around 1937. He characterized Bailey's performance thusly: "You get ready to go in the country at that time...you'd come to town. And you play a piece or two; let the people know which a-way you goin'. Then you take off." He had no idea where Bailey "took off".

At the time Miller saw him, Bailey's career was generally anchored around Leland, a town between Greenville and Indianola, some twenty-five miles southwest of *Dockery's* and ten miles west of Holly Ridge, Patton's Depression domicile. Leland residents (who numbered 2400 in 1930) remembered his local presence between 1932 (when he played with Patton and frequented a cafe called *Ruby's Place*) and 1945; a funeral parlor director recalled hearing him perform on a Leland street as recently as 1950. In that year the Bentonia bluesmen Henry Stuckey and Skip James met Bailey in a Moorhead barrelhouse, where he played mandolin. Another informant heard him play on an Indianola sidewalk in 1958. Two years later, he bobbed up in Canton, a hill town below the Delta. For a few days he played in a beer joint and on the sidewalk in front of the town's black brothel. From that point onwards his trail disappears. "They told me he died a natural death," reported a one-time house "frolic" employer, Robert Gildart of Leland. "...I didn't quizz 'em much about it...I wasn't too much interested...I said: 'Well, there's another goodtimer gone.'"

Bailey's origins are more certain than his probable demise in the 1960s. Thomas (Niney) Newton, a guitarist from the Sunflower County town of Linn (some fifteen miles southeast of *Dockery's*) who occasionally accompanied Patton in the Twenties, stated that Bailey hailed from the 5800 acre *Eastland* plantation near Doddsville, five miles below Ruleville. Another source placed him on

McCline's plantation nearby. The aging town constable who patrolled Doddsville in the mid-1960s recalled that Bailey had played on the town's main street four decades previously, but did not know anything about him. An occasional local associate was his cousin Ben Wiley Bailey, who died in 1966 at the age of sixty-two. His widow (who lived near Indianola when interviewed in 1967) said that he had played with Kid Bailey in Doddsville sometime before the latter's 1929 recording session. She knew nothing of Kid Bailey herself, and was the only Sunflower County relative who could be traced through an identical surname.

Patton was no stranger to Doddsville (or the *Eastland* plantation) in the Mid-Twenties, and it was in nearby Blaine, three miles southwards, that Hayes McMullen most frequently met up with Willie Brown in the late 1920s. Before World War One the vicinity of Drew, eleven miles north of Doddsville, was the turf of several musicians who borrowed chunks of Patton's material. Although one native of Drew would say that Bailey's *Mississippi Bottom Blues* sounded "just like Drew's Nathan Bankston" (who made similar comparisons between Bailey's *Rowdy Blues* and his own work), Bankston never heard of Bailey.

A one-time Ruleville farmer named Leroy Willis witnessed a number of Bailey's performances in the mid-Twenties, and adjudged him Charlie Patton's equal. "I remember the Kid in and around Drew, Ruleville, and Tutwiler," he remarked. "He played lots in Tutwiler...he's by hisself all the time." A favorite site of Bailey's performances was Tutwiler's *Silver Moon* cafe.

For two consecutive years in the late 1920s (probably between 1926 and 1928) Bailey held a franchise as a solist at week-end house "frolics" organized by a bootlegger named Alfred Davis on the *Hollyknoe* plantation, which lies about three miles southeast of Leland and forty miles southwest of Doddsville. Davis' wife Julia, who cooked for these affairs (which ran from Friday night to Sunday) thought that Bailey resided on the plantation, but did not farm there. She had no knowledge of his week-day activities, and the strong sense of shame her husband's irreligious activities produced in her prevented her from taking much notice of Bailey, whom she remembered as a heavy-set "dark brownskin" who stood over six feet tall. She nevertheless ventured the opinion that Bailey's voice was superior to Patton's because "he (Bailey) don't 'holler', singin'."

After the Mississippi flood of 1927, perhaps following his departure from *Hollyknoe*, Bailey frequented the town of Skene, about twenty miles northwards. "He'd come in here, I don't know exactly where he lived at," recalled a one-time resident, Bunk Ashford. "...He'd just go around, different places." One watering-spot was a jukehouse in nearby Boyle called *Dark Road*, which was frequented by Charlie Patton in the same period. "It seemed like they was good friends," Ashford said of the pair, adding that Bailey would always "play by hisself...he played guitar and then he used to play piano a little."

Bailey was also friends with Tommy Johnson, with whom he often played, according to Ishmon Bracey, "over there in Rankin County in a juke...call it *Gold.*" Johnson told Bracey that Bailey's *Rowdy Blues* was his own devising, and that he had also taught Charlie Patton *Pony Blues*. Bracey accepted these glib boasts at face value, and on listening to Bailey's record remarked: "He got that swing from Tommy, but he puts those words in there himself."

Though Bailey worked as a soloist, he is also recalled as a member of a string band that Charlie Patton took to various Sunflower County barrelhouses in the mid-1920s, and it may have been the success of this enterprise that encouraged his solitary career. Its other members, a mandolinist from around Doddsville named James Hardy, and a violinist who lived between Doddsville and Linn, John Nance, left a more vivid impression of their abilities than Bailey himself. Ishmon Bracey saw Hardy play with Patton in both Jackson and the Delta and said of him: "He could play a violin *and* a mandolin *and* a guitar." Nance, who also doubled as a guitarist, drew Booker Miller's acclaim: "That man could play anything, I believe...that fella naturally knowed music, but he couldn't sing: he ain't sung one word." Both are long since dead, and the sound they produced with Patton is unimaginable.

From Rags To Richmond

You don't know; sure don't know my mind
I don't show you my ticket now you
don't know where I'm gwine.
(*Devil Sent The Rain Blues*)

Throughout the 1920s Charlie Patton appears to have led the typical life of a footloose blues singer. "These people, they moved from one place to another," H.C. Speir once said of his discoveries. "They're not stable...they're in and out."

Thanks to his own travels, Patton became an ephemeral figure to his neighbors, leaving but a single recollection in the mind of a sharecropper who settled on *Dockery's* in the fall of 1921: "Charlie, he didn't stay in no one place too long: he'd be goin' to different places, makin' music." On weekdays he was likely to drop by his neighbors' cabins, Sara Garrett reported, and "just go play a tune or two; he wouldn't be askin' for no money, and neither no food." On weekends when he commanded a salary for his efforts he was likely to be anywhere in the Delta, if not Mississippi.[1] His professional contacts with other musicians were haphazard and short-lived, producing Booker Miller's observation: "Charlie, he was a man traveled a lot. First thing he'd tell you: he's going away. Then he'd go."

This rootlessness translated into Patton's primary song subject. Matter-of-fact departures from girlfriends figure in most of his songs:

I'm goin' away baby,
Won't be back no more.
(*Magnolia Blues*: 1929)

In two songs Patton left curious cameos of relationships ruptured by traveling. In *Pea Vine*, he abandoned a lover with the flinty rationale: "Livin' single, Lord you know I cannot stay." Though he dismissed her grief with snide sententiousness ("Stop your way of livin', an' you won't have to cry no more") he made no song response to the bitter reproach of the deceived lover, who was apparently expecting marriage:

> You know you know, you know you done done me wrong.

An anonymous mistress enshrined in *Rattlesnake Blues* was but a disposable convenience taken up in the course of a random journey:

> When I leave here mama I am goin', further down the road
> And when I leave there I am goin' back to the Gulf of Mexico.
>
> I'm gonna shake glad hands, with your lovin' boy
> Fixin' to eat my supper in, Shelby...?

That he has been a stand-in for her "lovin' boy" doesn't concern him. A mock complaint that she ceases to care for him after his departure represents his parting comment on this inconsequential affair:

> An' my baby got a heart like a piece of railroad steel
> After I leave here this mornin' never say: "Daddy how do you feel?"

None of his songs suggested that he missed a companion, on the road or at home. In *Joe Kirby*, he communicated a disgruntled sense of himself as a homeless person: "Just like a doggone rabbit, I ain't got no doggone den." In Part One of *Jim Lee*, he dramatized a lonely Mississippi river roustabout and his relationship with a promiscuous woman who boasts: "I got a kid on the wheeler, got a bullcow on the plough; got a plum good man bringin' down the Johnson bayou." The narrator uses facile melodramatic cliches (a romantic disappointment and a broken home) to explain his nomadism and need for a female sponsor:

> I was way up the river, some forty miles or more
> I think I heard the big *Jim Lee* when it blow.
>
> She blow, so lonesome, like she wasn't gonna blow no more
> Hey blow just like my baby gettin' on board.
>
> I'm a poor ol' boy, an' a long way from home
> An' she causin' me to leave my plum good home.

My mama is dead, an' my father went to sea
I ain't got nobody to love an' care for me.

Of the circumstances or attitudes that propelled his own itinerant life style Patton had nothing to say.

Like the romanticized drifter, the whistle of *Jim Lee* was a stock song prop, and Patton was to invoke it in the train whistle of *Pea Vine*, the "Marion whistle" of *Green River*, the "Bob Lee" whistle of *Hammer Blues*, and the "Helena whistle" of *Moon Going Down*. Elizabeth Moore recalled his unrecorded tribute to a boat that shuttled between Memphis and New Orleans and "didn't haul nothin' on it but whiskey"; it began: "I think I heard that *Minnie Johnson* when she blow." Of these assorted whistles, only that of the *Robert Lee Junior* boat, a Lee Line steamer that ran from St. Louis to Vicksburg and was discontinued in the late 1920s, could claim Delta renown.

With his various whistle allusions Patton played upon Delta romanticism of the same sort expressed by the planter-poet William Alexander Percy: "there is no sound in the world so filled with mystery and longing and unease as the sound at night of a riverboat blowing for the landing—one long, two shorts, one long, two shorts."[2] By use of a formula verse in which he would insert the names of various boats or trains Patton was perpetuating an old grain of river lore later described by Mary Wheeler in *Steamboatin' Days*: "It used to be a point of pride with people who knew and loved the language of the river to be able to recognize the approach of an important boat by the sound of her whistle or bell. Every whistle possessed a tone that could be identified."[3]

Despite its continued prominence in Patton's songs, the riverboat was part of a vanishing Mississippi landscape of the 1920s. So, too, it would seem, was the affluent Mississippi barrelhouse of the type Patton had probably sharpened his performing teeth in. The Mississippi bluesman Skip James associated barrelhouses with self-contained sawmill settlements and cities like Memphis; his basic Mississippi musical outlet in the 1920s was the plantation house "frolic". Hayes McMullen never glimpsed a barrelhouse in Tallahatchie County: he, too, played only at house "frolics". It is likely that Prohibition took a toll on these establishments, which would would have lost much of their allure to plantation revelers once "bond" whiskey became unavailable. House "frolics", which trafficked in locally produced corn whiskey, were for the most part untrammeled by Prohibition: under Mississippi law of the Twenties (designed to protect planter interests), state prohibition agents lacked authority to ferret out stills and alcohol on plantation property.

A likely consequence of the decline of the barrelhouse was the passing of the happy-go-lucky or matter-of-fact song of "sporting life", such as *Spoonful*,

Frankie, and *Hang It On The Wall,* in which Patton portrayed a plantation rube who prowled the town for sex:

> I been to town
> I walk around
> I start leavin' town
> I fool around
> My jelly; my roll; sweet mama don't you let it fall.

Whereas trips to town loomed large to the hayseed, Patton boasted of jaunts to cities. At least twice in the 1920s he ventured to St. Louis, where, he told Booker Miller, he performed at "Dago Hill," the fifty block Italian neighborhood on the city's south side (now called "The Hill"). "He had a song about that," Miller recalled, quoting the lyric:

> I'm gonna build me a mansion out on 'Dago Hill'
> Then I won't have to be goin' downtown every mornin', payin' bills.

"Dago Hill" was then renowned among blues singers for its resident bootleggers.

From St. Louis, Patton told Miller, he went to Chicago, a city he was to use as the backdrop of *Mean Black Moan.* He also spent a week in New Orleans, but told Miller (without elaborating) that he disliked "the set-up there." During one (perhaps his only) New Orleans jaunt, he entertained black laborers in the East Green section of nearby Gretna, the locale of the then-popular dialect writings of Robert Edward Kennedy.

In the 1920s it became possible for blues entertainers to reach audiences they never saw, via the phonograph. The introduction of cheap portable phonographs as a wartime gimmick around 1918 permitted blacks to become large-scale record consumers, and spendthrift habits fostered by decades under the plantation system ultimately prompted them, despite their bitter poverty, to pay 75¢ for records fated for a life-span of only a few dozen plays. The phonograph was to create its own generation of blues stars. It would impress Patton with a sense of his own insignificance: even after he became a celebrity in his own right through recording, Booker Miller recalled, he continued to look up to the likes of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Leroy Carr as "big shots".

Patton's own repertoire was enriched by records. He appropriated the melody and lyrics of Rainey's *Booze and Blues* (a 1924 Paramount release) to create his own *Tom Rushen Blues* (1929), paraphrased the lyrics of Ardelle

(Shelly) Bragg's slow-paced *Bird Nest Blues* (a 1926 Paramount release) on *Bird Nest Bound* (1930), and used Hound Head Henry's buffoonish vaudeville blues *Cryin' Blues* (a 1928 Vocalion) as the basis of *Poor Me* (1934). Booker Miller remembered: "He listened to records. I'll tell you one he kinda liked pretty good, but he never did try to play it. Leroy Carr put out a record, I think it was about in 'twenty-nine; it was *Prison Bound.* Now he liked it."

In turn, Patton's three trademark pieces were given wider currency by two musicians who preceded him to the recording studio. Tommy Johnson recorded versions of *Pony Blues* and *Maggie* (as *Bye Bye Blues* and *Maggie Campbell Blues*) some fourteen years after meeting Patton in Sunflower County. Johnson had since played midwife to assorted Mississippi bluesmen, his influence looming disproportionate to his sales appeal, which was, H.C. Speir discovered, primarily local (confined to Jackson). Upon receiving samples of Johnson's audition pieces for Speir, Victor recording director Ralph Peer was so dubious of their commercial worth that he accepted Johnson only on the condition that Speir order five hundred copies of his records to offset the cost of recording them — an exorbitant imposition considering that Speir's entire record stock normally ran to only three thousand items.

The willingness of record companies to speculate on Southern bluesmen like Johnson who had no apparent following beyond the exceedingly limited sphere reached by a single record dealer also sanctioned the recording of Walter (Pat) Rhodes, the first Sunflower County bluesman to appear on records. An accordian player from Ruleville (*Dockery's* nearest eastern neighbor) who had probably adopted his instrument from the example of Italians who peopled such Delta communities as Shelby and Shaw ("They whipped the hell out of the 'ccordian," one planter recalls), Rhodes was somewhere in his fifties or sixties at the time of his December, 1927 session. He would never have gained his momentary respite from oblivion had it not been for his nodding acquaintance with a thirty-seven year old minister named W.H. Buchanon, who had been approached to record for Columbia in Memphis while visiting a Ruleville dry goods store owned by two white brothers, Jake and Oscar Livingston. The latter brother, Buchanon recalled, "knew me well...He wanted me to go up there and preach a sermon or two." After a week's reflection on the matter, Buchanon accepted the offer and was handed a train ticket to Memphis. A day or so before his scheduled departure he happened across Rhodes, whom he had occasionally heard on Ruleville streets and plantation frolics during the previous six or eight years, playing what he calls "the old country racket". He persuaded Rhodes to similarly offer himself to Columbia. This gesture was almost certainly grounded in Buchanon's wish for a traveling companion, as he had no regard for Rhodes' musicianship: "He didn't know music...He didn't know *nothin'* much."

Apparently Columbia officials shared this opinion when they auditioned Rhodes on the afternoon of his arrival. "They didn't want to accept Pat's manner of singin'," Buchanon reports. Other aspirants fared no better, including Buchanon himself and the Reverend Frank Cotton, a native of Baird whose appearence on Paramount the following August was to make him the second Sunflower County resident to appear on records. "There's a white fella there from Nashville," Buchanon says, "and I told him to go home; don't let people make a fool of 'im...He was a guitar-picker but he couldn't sing; didn't have no voice or nothin'. I said: 'Go on home to your family.' He taken my advice..."

With similar audacity, Buchanon decided that the hapless Rhodes would prove suitable for recording if given fresh material. He thought to pair Rhodes with two guitar-playing brothers from Marvel, Arkansas, Richard and Mylar Harney, who had flunked their Columbia auditions the same day as Rhodes: "These boys made music, but they couldn't sing." On the following morning, he collared them at Columbia's makeshift studio and rehearsed them for two hours behind Rhodes. Then, despite Rhodes' apprehensions ("He was afraid 'cause they'd seen him do some of them so bad...") he presented them successfully to company officials.

Rarely (if ever) has a minister (or a non-professional of any stripe) been so actively involved with a secular recording session. On the night of their arrival in Memphis, Buchanon had sat up until three or four o'clock in the morning teaching Rhodes a song called *The Crowing Rooster* in an effort to shore him up for his second audition. "I just sit there and I 'studied' a lot of themes, and that's the only one I thought he could sing," Buchanon recalled. When he first recited the lyrics (which he had committed to paper) to Rhodes, he recalled, "it *so* tickled his fancy: he thought 'twas somethin' *new.*"

What was new material for Rhodes proved to be a listless rehash of the vintage Patton bottleneck staple, *Banty Rooster Blues*, which Rhodes rendered as a 12 1/2 bar song in the key of D. But while Buchanon afterwards could not recall the source of the composition, he claimed that he did not derive it from Patton: "I'd see him sometimes playin' in town, but I didn't pay him too much attention." As Patton was well known for the song, however, it is unlikely that Buchanon would have copied it from some other singer. In any event, his unique, unsalaried career as a blues arranger came to an end with the session: "I didn't pay that much attention to it from that day until now," he reminisced, when interviewed in Moorhead in 1972.

Although Rhodes remained a nonentity, more fabled for his alleged death by electrocution from lightning (said to have occurred in Alligator, Miss. in the late 1930s) than for his recording (which generated a pressing order of 9000), other seemingly unpromising players from the tank towns of the South suc-

ceeded in producing huge hits. At least two such figures, Jim Jackson and Blind Lemon Jefferson, created a far greater stir in the Delta than most of its native musicians. Both were to provide Patton (and numerous other bluesmen) with song motifs.

Jackson, a middle-aged entertainer from the hill town of Hernando, was affiliated with truck-borne medicine shows as a musician, buckdancer, and comedian, traveling in this capacity from south Missouri to south Mississippi. "...He couldn't play the guitar but a little bit," said Richard Harney, who once worked with Jackson, "but he do a whole lotta talkin'..." In off-seasons he supported himself as a street singer. H.C. Speir, who first heard Jackson playing in front of various drug stores in white Jackson, Mississippi neighborhoods five years before turning him up on Memphis' Beale Avenue in October of 1927, took a dim view of his prospects. "He was just a bum," Speir reported. "Nobody ever paid any attention to him." Repelled by Jackson's relish for cocaine, Speir hastily unloaded him on a Victor wholesaler named Loren Watson, who was then helping the company conduct a blues recording session in Memphis. He was startled when Jackson appeared on a rival label (Vocalion) and made an enormous hit with a song (*Kansas City Blues*) he had never heard Jackson perform.[4] Jackson's hit, a two chord song arranged in a 1-2 dance pattern (with a simple two beat tonic strum providing the accompaniment for 10 1/2 of its 12 1/2 measures) was atypical of both his own repertoire and the familiar realm of Southern blues. While Jackson's freak success had nothing to do with Speir's prescience, it boosted the latter's stock among record companies and called him (through Watson's recommendation) to the attention of Paramount recording director Art Laibly as a source of blues talent.

The commercial demand for dealer discoveries that led to the recording of guitar-playing blues singers was sparked by the equally improbable success of Blind Lemon Jefferson, a street singer from Wortham, Texas. In 1926 Jefferson was placed with Paramount by a Dallas dealer named R.J. Ashford as a sales gimmick to attract local shoppers. Instead, he became the label's leading attraction and created an industry vogue for uncelebrated blues guitarists who supplanted the band singers (largely female) culled from black vaudeville houses and recorded on the premise that they were established names. His recordings were copied by nearly every Mississippi bluesman who could mimic them. "Blind Lemon sent out a record about 'Catch my pony, saddle up my black mare,'" Booker Miller said, recalling his *Black Horse Blues* (1926). "Man, you oughta been there! That thing went like *wildfire* all over the country."

While Jefferson's Mississippi sales impressed Speir as "just fair", they gave pause to his only scouting rival, an Itta Bena dealer named Ralph Lembo (1898-1960). The Sicilian-born Lembo had begun his mercantile career by peddl-

ing dry goods from a wagon in Itta Bena and eventually opened a furniture store there, selling records and scouting on the side. Around 1927 he sent Jefferson train fare from Chicago and arranged for his Saturday afternoon appearance at his own shop, where he charged customers twenty five cents admission for a view of the artist. Despite advance fanfare (prior to the performance, he had paraded Jefferson about town on a wagon), the promotional stunt backfired, and after three hours of playing music Jefferson had grown so dissatisfied by the receipts Lembo collected that he refused to continue. Another financial dispute skewered his scheduled appearence (probably the same evening) at Itta Bena's Rolling Wall High School: "They had a big dance there and Lemon come in and play, and they was chargin' seventy five cents to come in," David Edwards recalled. "That was a lot of money then, and they couldn't get him to play for that seventy five cents."

It seems likely that Lembo was less interested in Jefferson's ability to collect a crowd at a record store already doing brisk business in his music than in his potential worth as a recording property. A spectator at Lembo's promotion debacle reports that he attempted to arrange a recording session for Jefferson but once again failed to come up with a satisfactory price. According to Booker Miller, Lembo's projected Jefferson session was also to have involved Charlie Patton: "Charlie, he went (to Lembo's store) and he said that (Lembo) wanted to send 'im to New Orleans to make some records down there..." Apparently Patton likewise balked at Lembo's terms: he would later deride Miller's own discovery by Lembo (in 1932) with the words: "Don't bother with it: isn't nothin' to it."

"He was tricky," Miller was to say of Lembo, "and I think Charlie kinda got wind of that." Adverse rumors concerning Lembo's ethics had arisen in the wake of his dealings with Rube Lacy, whom he had found in Itta Bena late in 1927, and C.F. Thornton, who pastored a Baptist church between Itta Bena and adjoining Berclair and had begun his ministerial career as a circuit rider with his father, who sold religious "ballots". "He got Rube Lacy to make some records," one informant charged, "and he never did pay him...that's what the people said." Thornton, who made two impassioned, incoherent sermons for Columbia in April of 1927, sued Lembo when his next effort (recorded at the session involving Walter Rhodes) failed to reach the market.[5] It was said that he collected a thousand dollars in damages but was afterwards arrested for "puttin' out false checks or somethin'", as one Itta Benian relates the episode. Finally, Lembo himself withdrew from the field of scouting altogether with the complaint that he was being bilked by record companies out of royalties or finder's fees.

The circumstances that prompted Patton to pose himself as a recording prospect to H.C. Speir in the spring of 1929 cannot be ascertained. He might

have obtained Speir's address from one of the latter's discoveries (such as Jim Jackson, whom he reportedly played with in Friar's Point) or from any of the assorted rejects Speir auditioned or recorded with equipment he had purchased in 1926 for the purpose of making demonstration records. Speir's recording machine, which stood in the second floor office of his music store, was such a novelty for its time and place that it brought him numerous audition pleas from correspondants, including a then-uncelebrated Tallulah Bankhead. For five dollars a disc he would make a vanity record of any artist he did not consider talented enough to recommend to a commercial company; otherwise, he would gamble on the artist in hopes of recouping his costs via a successful presentation.

After his audition, Patton became Speir's best pipeline to blues talent, gratuitously recommending rival artists on no promise of payment. Besides the five known properties he would bring to Paramount, he also interested Speir in several blues singers in Helena, Arkansas (of whom the scout only recalled: "They were good") and touted various female singers, probably girlfriends. These he would bring to Speir's store and accompany on the guitar. "I didn't think much of the women," Speir recalled; he would oblige them only to the extent of making free vanity records of them.

Patton's penchant for studio pairings led him to attempt a shared recording debut with Hayes McMullen, a 27-year old guitarist who lived near Tippo. As McMullen and his wife were walking to town from their plantation quarters on a Saturday morning in the spring of 1929, a model T Ford with four or five black passengers drew beside them. "They wanted me to go make records with Charlie Patton," he reports.

McMullen had been playing guitar since childhood and had amassed (by his own count) a repertoire of nearly a hundred songs, many of them acquired from players in the Tallahatchie County hills around Oakland and Charlestown, where he was born in 1902. "I was famous from about 1920 to '36...from this side of Oakland over near around Drew," he says. His professional aspirations were so marginal that he never owned a guitar, and when he was introduced to Patton as a fellow musician in 1928 at a dance near Indianola (where Ishmon Bracey had also first encountered Patton) he was too shy to borrow Patton's guitar: "I never asked a man to let me play his guitar."

Seven or eight years before meeting Patton, McMullen and his brother John Thomas (also a guitarist) had unwittingly learned a nameless version of Patton's *Maggie* from hill country musicians in eastern Tallahatchie County. After becoming Patton's occasional associate ("Biggest time I seen him was between Ruleville and Cleveland"), he adapted *Banty Rooster*, *Pony*, and *Down The Dirt Road* to his own relatively rigid and stylized way of playing, transposing the latter two pieces to "Spanish" tuning. Before being approached to record

with him, McMullen had last seen Patton on the occasions when he and "Little Willie" Brown had played for Saturday night suppers "out from Glendora". However, he was so disaffected by Patton and so squeamish at the prospect of recording blues that he asked no questions of Patton's intermediaries and never broached the subject with Patton afterwards. Instead, he merely conveyed his refusal (which he rationalizes as follows) to the former: ..."At that time, see, I just didn't want my voice all over the world, you know; I just thought it was too *bad*, playin' blues like that for the world you know, and they didn't offer me but five dollars for every record I put out. It wasn't much...

"The five dollars mighta been all right, but see, they take one record and they could make a thousand records from it, you know, and look at the money they'd be makin' if they didn't sell 'em for but fifty cents apiece, see?"

As five dollars per side was the standard fee H.C. Speir offered blues accompanists, it would seem that Patton had tried to recruit McMullen as a backing guitarist. Such an attempted pairing is curious, as Patton had no musical need for accompanists. He could scarcely have settled on a less likely one than McMullen: the latter had no experience accompanying him and had never even performed with him by pre-arrangement; as he explains: "When I'd meet up with them (Patton and Willie Brown), I wasn't goin' to play *with* them folks: I'd just be out, at the ball." Nonetheless, his services as a stand-in were frequently required because Patton would (he claimed) become completely incapacitated by drinking. Patton was less enamored of McMullen's playing than Willie Brown, of whom McMullen says: "I don't care where I was; he wanted to play with me." It is possible that he looked towards McMullen to spite Brown, whose absence from Patton's first session, Son House guessed, resulted from "...a fallin' out: they couldn't get along together *no* kinda way." As it so happened, McMullen's refusal to record with Patton was a distinct blessing to modern listeners, for he had a musically barbaric habit of tuning his top string flat and confined his music to the slow tempos he believed made his music more suitable for dancing the Shimmy-She-Wobble (his favorite dance), instead of the relatively fast tempos Patton favored.

It was H.C. Speir's practice to make "tests" (as he termed audition records) of his discoveries at his store and simultaneously offer them to the four or five companies with whom he had working contacts. He later had a vague recollection of making tests of Patton after auditioning him at *Dockery's* and of attempting to place him with Victor, the industry's largest record producer. Whether by virtue of a Victor rejection slip or its own prior response to Speir's offer (he usually dispatched an artist to the first bidder), the Paramount label wound up with Patton on the basis of Speir's verbal recommendation, which resulted in something like a $150 commission for him.[6]

Paramount had been established eleven years earlier as a pop label by the owner of a desk and school furniture manufacturer, the Wisconsin Chair Company of Port Washington, Wisconsin. Originally it had featured (as an early advertising squib put it) "artists the record buyers know — Billy Murray, Henry Burr, Arthur Fields, Helen Clark..." But these investments proved unprofitable, owing to a combination of circumstances: the inexperience of Paramount's executives (all drawn from chair company personnel), the meagerness of its capitalization (which precluded the use of bona fide recording attractions), the insurmountable competition of over 150 rival labels (most of which were scrambling for the same marginal markets), the emergence of the new-fangled radio (which began to displace the victrola as a favorite item of home recreation in the early Twenties), and a postwar economic slump. Then, contrary to all established industry wisdom, Paramount recording director Maurice Supper abruptly changed the label's music orientation without first establishing (via trial releases) an existing demand for its product. Once the company entered the "race" (black music) field in 1922, its loss ledgers began shrinking immediately. As the company's former president Otto Moeser later recalled: "Race records put us over."

Despite Paramount's position as the only solvent record label of its day that basically catered to the "race" market, it was neither the best-selling "race" label nor the most discriminating in regards to musical talent. It maintained distributors in nearly every large city east of the Rockies, from Detroit to Dallas, but by the mid-1920s, its most lucrative markets were concentrated in Mississippi and Arkansas. These largely rural states contained a combined black farm population of over a million persons in 1930. The territory was single-handedly serviced (and for the most part developed) by Earl Montgomery, a Memphis-based employee of Paramount's largest distributor, the Artophone Corporation of St. Louis. Montgomery sold Paramounts (along with the two other labels Artophone distributed, OKeh and Vocalion) not only to the furniture and drug stores that counted as the most important retail outlets of the period (there having been few music stores as such in the South), but to plantation commissaries as well. Thus the label was readily accessible in Mississippi's most remote areas; in some instances, enterprising town dealers visited outlying plantations and sold the records door to door.

Montgomery landed his job around 1925 expressly because of his formal ignorance of blues music; during his interview with the president of Artophone he had sheepishly blurted out that he couldn't "tell one fuckin' note from another one." His future employer quickly assured him: "I could tell that the minute we sat down. That's the reason I'm hiring you: these guys who know all about music can't sell doodley-shit."

Yet only the foggiest sales principles guided Artophone's executives as they ordered new releases from Paramount. "We never had a theory," recounted the firm's former vice-president Herb Schiele. "...We would spend a long time listening (to sample records) and trying to...judge the hits against the duds." Within Paramount itself there was but one mechanism for weeding out suspected sales "duds": the cocksure opinions of a Birmingham record salesman named Harry Charles, who had been hired in the early Twenties to evaluate its weekly releases from the standpoint of commerciality and who sometimes fed his own finds (usually "duds") to his employers. Charles' reaction to *Pony Blues* when the record was played for him in 1970 throws an interesting light on the thinking of the 1920s' "race" official. Patton's song, he declared, impressed him "not much": "...There's a lot better." He claimed that he would have advised Paramount to reject Patton because the singer's diction would have been unintelligible to black consumers.

Fortunately for Patton, Harry Charles was no longer employed by Paramount in 1929. The company's policy decisions rested solely on the discretion of Arthur C. Laibly, a 35-year old lumber salesman turned record executive who had risen within the company by sponsoring the recording of Blind Lemon Jefferson when he had been its sales manager. Speir was one of his five sources of blues talent (along with Charles, Ashford, Watson, and W. R. Calaway of Virginia) for blues talent, and Laibly usually accepted his recommendations at face value without even requesting an audition record. "A lot of them didn't," Speir observed. After rubber-stamping a Patton who would have likely been presented to him in the most general terms (perhaps merely as a male blues singer), Laibly mailed Speir a train ticket on Patton's behalf good for the 750-mile trek between Jackson and Richmond, Indiana, a city of 32,000 located fifty-five miles northwest of Cincinnati. Lacking its own recording studios, Paramount used the facilities of Gennett Records, which stood off Main Street on the city's west side, at a cost of $80 per wax master. Incoming artists were usually met at the C&O depot a few blocks from the studio, which had to schedule its recording between train arrivals so as not to pick up whistle noises.

Patton appears to have traveled from Jackson in the company of Walter (Buddy Boy) Hawkins, whom Harry Charles had originally presented to the company in 1927. "I found him here in Birmingham singin' on the streets...over on Fourth Avenue," Charles said. Once in the studio, Hawkins had become so intimidated that he kept recoiling from the microphone, spoiling numerous takes in the process. "I had the hardest time recordin' him I did anybody," Charles recalled. In order to ground Hawkins, Charles finally equipped him with a pair of headphones and choreographed his movements from the control booth: "Every time he started to move I say: 'Stand still! Stand up there!'" In an age

when blues musicians were prone to be judged by their pliability rather than musical ability, the esoteric but erratic Hawkins chiefly impressed Charles as an unwanted nuisance: "He'd look up at you just like a monkey...He didn't have a speck of sense...He didn't even have brains enough to get back to the train (after recording)...You couldn't tell *what* he's gonna do." After sharing a session with Patton (which resulted in four sides), Hawkins was finished as a commercial recording property.

Patton's comparative professionalism is attested to by his gargantuan studio output. In a single session held on June 14, 1929 he spun out fourteen sides, more than any blues recording act had ever produced in one sitting. His knack for producing perfect takes must have amazed Laibly, for Mayo Williams (Laibly's predecessor as Paramount recording director) had considered a day's session complete if he managed to squeeze three or four usable titles from a blues artist.

Patton's productivity was all the more impressive when one considers the tuning adjustments his records involved. He used three tunings (standard, open A and open E) set at various pitches. To record all of his songs on a single instrument would have required him to re-tune his guitar five times in the course of his session. He may have simplified this process by using a studio model in addition to his own.

Patton's guitar (which he equipped with a strap and protected with a case) was a Stella that Miller described as looking "like it was made outta cypress; tan...with a lotta fancy trimming around it."[7] "He kept a Stella all the time; that was his favorite box," Miller noted. Miller, who maintained that a Stella "picked easier" than a Gibson (which he termed "the best guitar you could buy in those days"), priced Patton's model at thirty-odd dollars (as opposed to the $47 Gibson he cited as the most expensive instrument then available). More significant than its decorations was the fact that Patton seems to have tuned it at least a step above concert pitch. The penetrating guitar sound he thereby attained was ideal for the Paramount label, which was even then notorious among dealers for its poor sound quality.

Thanks to his productivity, Patton stood to earn something beyond the flat $50 per side Speir ordinarily negotiated for his finds: "If a man that was makin' the record didn't have but two songs," Speir noted, "he didn't get much...If you come up with six songs, he got pretty good pay."

It is unlikely that Patton would have been permitted to record enough material for seven records unless his producer was convinced of his superior sales potential. If Patton earned $50 per side (instead of the $75 he more likely earned) his session would have cost at least $1,970 to produce, including the finder's fee paid to Speir. To recoup this cost alone, which did not include the cost of record manufacture or expense money doled out to Speir (whom

Paramount reimbursed 10¢ a mile for all traveling done on behalf of accepted discoveries) and Patton (which would amount to the cost of his train ticket, and meal money), the company had to sell an average of 1300 copies of each Patton release (or about 9100 records in toto). Although this total is trifling by modern standards, it exceeded the 500 copies that "race" companies represented to Speir as the break-even sale for single blues records, and would have been particularly extravagant for a company whose general operations were so tight-fisted that the return of a hundred unsold records from a distributor would become an occasion for executive grumbling.

Patton's session lasted nearly an entire working day, for a full day's recording schedule then involved no more than eighteen or twenty sides. It seems to have been a casual, unstructured affair. At one point he contributed incidental talk and singing as Buddy Boy Hawkins sang *Snatch It And Grab It.* At another point a soft background voice joined Patton in a verse-ending phrase of the spiritual, *I'm Going Home*; the identity of the singer remains unknown. The two-part spiritual *Prayer Of Death* (which Paramount was to issue as the work of "Elder J. J. Hadley") sounded as if it were the product of studio puttering. The first part began with chiming imitations of a death bell, and coalesced into a version of *I'm Going Home*; part two began with bass responses to chanted religious affirmations, and concluded with *Hold To God's Unchanging Hand.*

Laibly's method of recording seems to have been non-directive to the point of reducing him to little more than an engineer. Whereas his predecessor Mayo Williams made a concerted effort to pair potential hits with unpromising material (remarking, "We would throw *anything* on the B side; we didn't want two hits on a record"), Laibly let Patton record a succession of top-line pieces. The only one of the nine blues Patton recorded at Richmond that did not belong to his familiar repertoire and thus warranted "B" side designation was *It Won't Be Long,* his remake of *Banty Rooster.*

The little that is known of Laibly's value judgments can be gleaned from the way he paired sides and timed releases over Patton's first and subsequent sessions. Whereas songs of sexual innuendo had undoubted commercial value, *Shake It And Break It* was issued as "B" side of *Spoonful.* Titles with proper names (*Tom Rushen, Elder Greene,* and *Jim Lee*) would be relegated to "B" side status, on the apparent grounds that the unfamiliarity of their subjects diminished their commercial appeal; the sole exception, *Joe Kirby,* was belatedly issued over a year after it was recorded. Four songs that had no musical credentials as blues (*Mississsippi Bo Weavil, Spoonful, Runnin' Wild,* and *Elder Greene*) would be labeled as such on the apparent premise that the term "blues" enhanced commerciality. Under Williams' stewardship Paramount's black artists were discouraged from recording white or pop material, and Laibly seems to

have followed this practice. Two tunes of dubious racial purity (*Frankie And Albert* and *Some Of These Days*) were the last issued Patton titles; another such tune (*Runnin' Wild*) would be issued as a "B" side.

Laibly did not expressly solicit Patton's best known pieces: he recorded *Maggie* under a relatively obscure title, *Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues.* Titles were transcribed phonetically; *Tom Rushin' Blues* was to appear as *Tom Rushen.* Composer credits were routinely alloted to Patton, regardless of what material he recorded, but this act was a formality: in keeping with company practice of the period, none of the songs was copyrighted.

In view of the fact that Patton (working without royalty payments) had no economic incentive to play anything more exalted than issuable music, the inspired quality of his recordings is uncanny. It is all the more so when one considers how dated much of Patton's material was. Had he been accustomed to playing *Pony Blues* only three times a week since 1910, he stood to have performed it nearly three thousand times by the time he came to Richmond. Yet he brought an air of immediacy and unpredictability to this song and other similarly jaded staples.

However dated Patton's material, to all intents and purposes he brought a new dimension of artistry to dance music as it existed in 1929. Of all the bluesmen of the era who reached the recording studio, he was the only singer-guitarist capable of embellishing his voice as he played and the only dance guitarist who played improvisatory figures. As *Spoonful* demonstrated, he was seemingly the only blues guitarist of the age who could completely rearrange material. He recorded the only blues song (*Screamin' And Hollerin'*) with a basically improvisatory melody, the only dance blues without a constantly repeating melody *(Pony Blues*), and the only dance song that had appreciable instrumental variations (*Screamin And Hollerin'*, with its three bass lines). Thanks to such devices, and his flexible singing, his music had a dramatic impact that elevated it above the one-dimensional sphere of dance music.

Though frozen on records, the nuances of Patton's music remained lost on its producers. "These people didn't know nothin' except from sales," H.C. Speir said of the day's "race" recording directors. "If it sold, they knew that, and if it didn't, they knew that." Interviewed in 1966, Laibly declined to single out any Paramount artist as a talented guitarist, and the mere suggestion that his label contained any musicians of stature exasperated him. "These people," he said of his blues retinue, "were *simple* people. They sang the way they lived and thought..."

A Session With Son Sims

"Charlie had so many crazy pieces you couldn't count 'em."—Son House

Soon after returning from Richmond, Patton visited H.C. Speir's record store in Jackson and purchased copies of his new releases, as he was wont to do after subsequent recording sessions. These he sold to neighbors on *Dockery's* plantation, probably at a considerable mark-up from their original 75¢ retail price. "Everybody on the place wanted 'em," his nephew Tom Cannon recalled. Promoting himself with a professionalism unknown to his peers, he corresponded with Speir regarding his future recording prospects and devised a novel means of publicizing his appearances at dances: cards bearing his photograph and handwritten details of forthcoming engagements. These he would pass out to listeners who heard him play on the street.

Patton had apparently presented his photograph to Art Laibly, for Paramount (which did not photograph artists during Laibly's tenure as recording director) featured his likeness on the front page of a four page sales catalogue it sent to dealers in the fall of 1929. Besides the youthful portrait Lizzie Taylor owned of Patton, taken perhaps two decades earlier, there is no other extant picture of him. In the later pose Patton looks gaunt and emaciated by comparison to his appearance in Taylor's portrait, which, Hayes McMullen thought, still resembled Patton in the late 1920s.

As its own promotional gimmick, Paramount advertised *Mississippi Bo Weavil* in *The Chicago Defender* as the work of the "Masked Marvel" and offered a free record to anyone who could identify its performer. The company squandered a probable hit by placing two of Patton's best-known songs, *Pony Blues* and *Banty Rooster*, on the same record. The featured *Pony Blues*, issued in July of 1929, became a Paramount best-seller despite its untimely appearance; it was in the fall harvest season that blues records sold best in Mississippi, Speir noticed, with items released in other seasons (particularly winter, when farmers were without income) languishing. Its success must have been particularly welcome to Art Laibly, who had failed to turn up a single hit-maker in two years as Paramount recording director.

As with other popular "race" artists, Patton's naivety in working for flat fees instead of royalties proved costly to him. A standard royalty of 2.5¢ per side would have equalled his likely recording fee of $75 fee per side with the sale of a mere 3,000 records, a total that all of the records resulting from his first session should have easily eclipsed. Ironically, Paramount's inequitable rate structure acted to preserve Patton's music for posterity. Thanks to its meager investment in him, the company could afford to indulge his studio fancies on the premise that one of them might become a hit.

While there is no way to calculate the sales of *Pony Blues*, it no doubt sold far in excess of the 10,000 copies that Paramount executives designated a "hit" and (in Mayo Williams' tenure) exacted as the minimum sales figure an artist had to attain before being recorded again by the company. The record may have sold five times that amount, or half the number Paramount was able to sell of its biggest "race" hits by artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson and Ma Rainey, who enjoyed general Southern racial popularity. The majority of its purchasers were Mississippians who probably bought *Pony Blues* because they had already heard Patton or were moved by his reputation, which was sufficient for Paramount to tout him in the *Defender* as "one of the best known artists in the South."

Patton's success was not lost upon competing record companies, who, Speir recalled, pursued him "like a swarm of bees" in the wake of his successful recording debut. This interest in Patton did not tempt Speir to place him with another label: the latter was adverse to the contract-jumping that was then rife in the blues field. Had he suspected that Paramount contracts were of dubious validity, Speir might not have adhered to this scruple. In 1924, unknown to Speir, the company had forfeited its corporate status with the claim (apparently advanced to escape taxes) that it was defunct.

Patton passed the summer of 1929 in the Bolivar County town of Merigold, whose high sheriff, Tom Rushing, had been the subject of one of his recent recordings. Located two *Dog* stops north of Cleveland, it numbered 800 people, including a contingent of Belgians and a 23-year old fledging guitarist recently arrived from Arcola, Willie (Have Mercy) Young. "The first time I seen him," Young recalled of Patton, "he's on the streets playin' that box about: 'Saddle up my pony, catchin' up my black mare!' Ha—I never *will* forget that old piece." Young learned "Spanish" tuning and a rudimentary version of *Pony* from Patton and claimed to have accompanied him at local house parties. In the summer of 1967 he was still playing for his own amusement on the back porch of his home in Leland, sounding as though his progress as a musician had been permanently arrested in 1929.

A more ambitious protege Patton collected in the wake of his recording debut was the 19-year old Booker (Mister Pink) Miller of Swiftown, who first

saw him playing on a Ruleville sidewalk shortly after the release of *Down The Dirt Road Blues* in November of 1929. "He was playin' at a place, and I come by, and I was playin' on the box," Miller later recalled. "He come to me. We began to talk to each other, and he found out that I was interested in music, and he musta liked me because I liked him, and admired his records. So he taken a big interest in me and he began to teach me different things he thought I ought to know." Over the next five years, Miller not only received general blues pointers from Patton, but also demonstrations of the first pieces his idol had ever played on the guitar. A week after their first encounter they performed together at a dance on Eastland's plantation near Doddsville, but for a time afterwards, Miller latched onto another experienced bluesman, James Binnel of Clarksdale. "Now he was good," Miller said of Binnel. "...He wasn't as good as Charlie was, but looked like to me I could do better on the James pieces...because Charlie *fussed* a lot. If you don't do it right, now, Charlie just don't harbor with you."

As always, Patton's bedmates outnumbered musical cronies. While living in Merigold he had assorted "wives" named Udy (whose sister, Sudy, had married his brother "Son"), Polly, and Bessie. Then, to the chagrin of her husband Floyd, he interested himself in a *Dockery's* tenant named Katie Williams. After the pair left the plantation together, Williams, a long-time *Dockery's* tenant, complained of Patton's behavior to Will Dockery's foreman, H.G. Jett. The incident marked at least the second time Patton had subverted a tenant household by cuckolding one of *Dockery's* wage hands.

Upon receiving Williams' account of the matter, Jett probably weighed the productivity of the two rivals and acted in favor of the more desirable tenant. "When he (Patton) come back," his nephew Tom Cannon recalled, "Mister Jett...told him if he couldn't do no better than that, he'd rather for him to leave." More likely, Patton was warned off the plantation.

Although some black tenants were even then willing to raise rebellious fists against *Dockery's* white employees, Patton accepted his ouster without protest. "...He said he'd rather went," Booker Miller recalled. "He didn't hunt trouble." Four years later, Patton would dramatize his banishment, half-intelligably, on a blues recording:

> I ain't gonna tell nobody, "Thirty-Four!" have done for me
> Christmas rolled up, I was broke as I could be.
>
> They run me from *Will Dockery*...
> ...told papa Charlie: "Don't want you hangin' round

on my job no more."
(*Thirty Four Blues*)

In contemporary slang, "Thirty-four" meant "Get away!".[1]

Patton's fling with Katie Williams lasted but two or three months; his departure from *Dockery's* was intermittent. Though prohibited from living on the premises, his nephew recalled, "he'd come in here anytime he got ready to see his sister...He'd come in and stay a whole week; Mister Jett didn't bother him." Often when he was in the area Patton would stay on the adjoining *D. D. Turner* plantation near Ruleville.

For the remainder of 1929 Patton appears to have had no fixed address. He spent a brief period on the *Anderson* plantation near Cleveland; his next residence was probably the *R. M. Dakin* plantation near Skene (four miles southwest of Cleveland), where his daughter Willie Mae lived. Over the ensuing years he became such a familiar sight in Skene that Earl Montgomery, the salesman who supplied its plantation commissary with Paramounts, mistakenly regarded him as one of its natives. Willie Young reported that Patton lived in Pace (a town between Skene and Rosedale) in the latter part of 1929; a local fan named Willie Jackson would chauffeur him to parties at such places as Leland in a car. In this period, Patton also joined what Young called "a little old nigger minstrel show" that operated out of Nashville. He appeared with it in Memphis, "all out there to Drews, Tutwiley (Tutwiler), Lamose (Lambert), Blaimes (Blaine), all right down to Cleveland, Shaw, Rolling Fork..."

His only known associate in the Skene vicinity was the obscure Kid Bailey. "He didn't sing Charlie's songs; he'd always sing different," recalled one localite who saw Bailey and Patton perform in Skene. Yet in October of 1929 Bailey and an uncredited guitarist recorded a duet version of *Pony Blues* called *Rowdy Blues* for Brunswick in Memphis. To Son House, the record sounded like the work of Willie Brown with the backing guitar of Charlie Patton. More likely, the second guitar was Brown's: in 1929 Bailey had performed with him "more than one time" at a Lake Cormorant jukehouse owned by a white merchant named T. C. Norris, recalls Elizabeth Moore. "Him and Kid supposedly went up yonder where they made some records," she added. "...That's what Willie Brown says...Willie come back home on Saturday night...We asked him: 'Where you been, 'old Cat'? — we called him 'old Cat' around there. He say: 'Oh, me and Kid been out makin' some records.'" At the time, she discounted Brown's talk as idle boasting.

Bailey's imitation brought him neither fame nor prestige. On hearing *Rowdy Blues* in 1967 Booker Miller would dismiss it as a crude caricature of *Pony*: "He don't stay with it, but he hits it now and then." H.C. Speir's reaction to *Rowdy Blues* was even more acerbic: "Just a flat blues...just a common blues."

Sometime between late November of 1929 and the spring of 1930, when Paramount had issued at least four records from his debut session, Speir received a telegram from Arthur Laibly directing him to arrange for Patton's return to the recording studio.[2] Finding Patton proved to be no easy task.

At *Dockery's* Speir was told that Patton had decamped for Cleveland; at Cleveland, he learned that Patton had since moved to *Jefferies*, a large Coahoma County plantation located across the Mississippi River from Helena, Arkansas. (Like *Dockery's*, *Jefferies* appeared as a town on contemporary maps.) Once produced on the plantation, Patton proposed to record with a recent playing partner, Henry Sims, the thirty-nine year old leader of a string band called the Mississippi Corn Shuckers. Speir seems to have consented to this suggestion without auditioning Sims, who lived twenty five miles southwest of *Jefferies* on Will Borden's plantation near Farrell.

Patton and Sims subsequently traveled by train from Memphis to Grafton, Wisconsin, a small town near Port Washington, the site of Paramount's front offices. In a new studio on Falls Road that an English sound engineer had designed free of charge for Paramount (a dwarfish structure, it was likened by Tommy Johnson to a "chicken coop"), Patton would produce another batch of fourteen sides at one sitting and return the following day to record at least nine more tunes.[3] Sims would accompany eight of his works.

None of Patton's records would bill Sims as his duet partner; all but one were labelled as featuring only guitar accompaniment. There was a certain justice in this typical industry oversight, as Sims had no career affiliation with Patton. Perhaps his presence on Patton's records was only due to the fact that as youths "they was good friends with one another," as Sims' sister Roberta Jameson put it.

The only male in a family of six children[4], Sims had been born on August 22, 1890 in the Delta town of Anguilla, which then numbered 175 residents. His mother Mary had given him his life-long nickname of "Son" during his boyhood, which was spent near Cleveland at the all-black town of Renova. Although Sims' parents shared the churchgoers' customary disapproval of their son's earliest musical experiments (which were conducted on piano), they believed that his "nature" should be allowed to assert itself, and thus permitted him to pursue music without interference. Eventually Sims would learn five instruments: piano, guitar, bass viol, violin, and mandolin. He learned the violin from his maternal grandfather Warren Scott, a slave who had been raised in Baltimore and Maryland and lived in Renova before moving to Eudora, Arkansas, where he died sometime during the World War One era.

Reluctantly, Sims had seen army duty in France during World War One, but otherwise led a placid, insular existence. For about ten years prior to

recording with Patton his world had been largely bounded by two Coahoma County towns, Farrell and Clarksdale, the one numbering 250 and the other 10,000 residents in 1930. His career as a string band musician dated to 1919 or 1922, when he walked into a Clarksdale barrelhouse and buttonholed a local guitarist named Percy Thomas with the proposal that they join forces. Thomas (1897-1968), a portly man Sims addressed as "Chief", became his closest friend, and the recipient of his pocket watch when Sims grew pessimistic about his prospects for survival after undergoing a series of operations in the 1950s.

In their early practice sessions Sims frequently chided Thomas for making musical errors. After three weeks, however, he pronounced them fit for professional engagements and cast about for additional personnel. In Stovall (the first town north of Farrell) he recruited a mandolin-playing friend, Louis Ford, who was three years older than himself. Then he visited Greenville and procured a local bass player known only as "Pitty Pat", for the percussion his bare feet provided. The unit Sims assembled would remain intact for the next twenty five years, with Sims serving as its violinist and eventually, namesake: christened the Mississippi Corn Shuckers, it gradually became known as the Son Sims Four.

The Corn Shuckers were a white-oriented string band whose most lucrative booking was a square dance given by a Clarksdale social club given on the first Friday of each month. Although Sims made no secret of his distaste for plantation labor, he normally gained a livelihood as a sharecropper, playing music on week-ends and during the winter lay-off seasons he liked to pass in a section of Clarksdale called "The Brickyards". It was there or in Farrell that Sims had met up with Patton, forming a tenuous association that lasted, Thomas supposed, only a week or so. (In Sims' youth, his sister thought, the pair had never played together.) The association was also unpublicized: as if chary of his colleagues' jealousy or their ability to upstage him, Sims never introduced them to Patton or mentioned the recordings that were the one plateau of his otherwise uneventful career.

Chastened by a childhood religious conversion, Sims conducted himself in a fashion that had less in common with other Delta bluesmen than with the clergy. Most of his income went towards food and clothes, and the pastor who preached his funeral at Clarksdale's Bell Grove Baptist Church would declare that he had set a better Christian example than most of the congregation's regular members. He enjoyed an enduring marriage to a woman named Lizzie Smith, whom he addressed deferentially as "Miss Lizzie" (she was twelve years his senior but would survive him by six years). During their occasional domestic spats Sims would either take refuge with Percy Thomas or with his sister Roberta in Memphis, where he would work as a houseboy until prodded by

her suggestions that he return to his wife.[5] Although he was fond of alcohol, drinking only made him pious and drowsy: "...He drank but he didn't 'clown', you know," Roberta said. "He'd get somewhere...talk all that 'deacon' talk...and he'd go to sleep." On the single occasion Percy Thomas saw him lose his temper—in an argument with a man called "Sparkplug" which occurred when the band was en route from a picnic some seven years before his recording session—the matter ended disastrously for Sims, who was cold-cocked by a sudden blow on the nose delivered by his adversary's brass-knuckled fist. All told, there was probably no musician in the Delta who less resembled Patton than "Son" Sims, who stood an inch or so shy of six feet, weighed 160-odd pounds, and was conspicuous only for the flabby pouches of flesh that protruded beneath his deep-set eyes.

Their studio collaboration was equally incongruous, for it never occurred to H.C. Speir to suggest a recording partner for Patton. As he later explained: "Charlie was *good* with that guitar." The fiddle Sims was to deploy behind Patton was not his primary instrument: "He liked that mandolin best," his sister reported. Nor was it Patton's favorite accompanying instrument: "He said he'd rather play with two guitars than play with a fiddle," Booker Miller noted. When Sims returned from their session he carried only a mandolin, inviting the conclusion that he had originally intended to back Patton on that instrument, but had been diverted to violin by Art Laibly, who had once played that instrument in a West Virginia pop orchestra.

Only the first two songs of their session, *Going To Move To Alabama* and *Elder Greene*, sounded particularly practiced and attained the stature of true musical duets. On these tunes and a subsequent non-blues offering, *Runnin' Wild*, (a diatonic ditty that struck Hayes McMullen as sounding "like a church song"), Sims achieved a full accompaniment by emulating Patton's vocal melody. None of these works seems to have favorably impressed Laibly, who relegated them to the "B" sides of issued titles.

Sims' inexperience as a strict blues accompanist is evident from his feeble contributions to *Devil Sent The Rain*, *Circle Round The Moon*, *Rattlesnake Blues*, and *Joe Kirby*. On these pieces he offered no accompaniment except to match Patton's tonic chord strums or riffs with his own phrases, typically supplying only a measure where Patton produced a six beat fill. The only straightforward blues for which Sims devised a melodic accompaniment was the slow-paced *Mean Black Moan*, which ended the second day's session and can be safely reckoned as the product of Grafton tinkering. On this piece, as on *Runnin' Wild*, Patton played "complement" style guitar and deferred to Sims as the lead instrumentalist.

Sims' gauche musicianship is primarily of interest for its likely link with the nineteenth century idiom of his grandfather. His terse filler phrases were

nearly devoid of blues tones: in *Devil Sent The Rain*, for example, he contributed four notes from the major scale (the keynote, second, third, and dominant), while his fills on *Rattlesnake* pitted major thirds against Patton's minor thirds. He played *Elder Greene* with the pentatonic intervals of its forerunner *Alabama Bound*, a ditty that belonged in his regular repertoire, his sister reports. Patton, however, recast the song in a blues tonality, employing different intervals (minor thirds and sevenths and major fourths).

Sims' intonation tended to be imprecise and his apparent failure to use resin gave his tone a shrill, grating quality. "He'd come 'cross (i.e., sound) kinda like a saw," a sister said of his playing. "He didn't put any resin on. I'd be listenin' at the music. I didn't take time to ask him about the roughness (of his sound); I'd be enjoyin' the music." His only flourish of note was the mandolin-like rolls he dispensed on *Mean Black Moan*.

Patton may have been utterly indifferent to Sims' capabilities when they formed a working partnership at an all-night dance. In such a setting the presence of any instrumentalist who could mount a few leads could enable him to coast with "complement" guitar in the style he affected on *Runnin' Wild*, which involved an undemanding succession of pattern strokes.[6]

Patton's own recordings presented many departures from his first session. Having spent his front-line repertoire on his first session, he assembled a variety of little-known tunes. Though Booker Miller believed that "in the time me and him was together I heard him play every piece he knew" he was completely unfamiliar with *Going To Move To Alabama*, *Elder Greene Blues*, or *Mean Black Moan*, of which he said: "That's a new one on me, but that sure is him." He never heard Patton play any accompaniment resembling that of *Devil Sent The Rain* (his only recorded piece in the A position) or *Heart Like Railroad Steel*.

Patton's second session would not have taxed his repertoire had he been willing to traffic in the sexual material that was a mainstay of his live performances. "...He sing more of them than he did blues," House said of songs in the mode of *Shake It And Break It*, of which Miller said: "Back there in the Thirties and Twenties like that, stuff like that was *popular*." His fund of risque' songs included a *Jelly Roll King* and a *Mama Can't You Keep It Clean*, of which House said: "...Charlie had so many dirty verses to it...he'd sing it often, you know, at them Saturday night balls." The former tune, which Willie Moore recalled as a Patton favorite, began:

> Jelly roll, jelly roll is so hard to find
> It killed the old man and run the young one blind.

Another bawdy Patton production House was to hear him perform began:

> Don't sell nothing, don't give a thing away
> Save it all for your daddy, I'll be back some day.

"There was one...he got me to singing it directly," House added. "Charlie had me singin' that mess: 'Up the hickory, down the pine, I bust my britches right behind.'"[7]

In addition to such songs, Patton performed the contemporary hit *Tight Like That* and standards like *Salty Dog, Four O'Clock Blues*, and *Pallet On Floor.* After listening to Willie Brown's Library of Congress recording of the latter piece, Hayes McMullen would note: "Charlie Patton used to play them kinda pieces, too."

Patton apparently preferred to record lesser-known tunes, or works of his own devising. "Here's what Patton could do," said Hayes McMullen, by way of pointing up his most (to McMullen) remarkable gift. "Charlie Patton could make up a song outta anything." Every time McMullen heard Patton, the artist had at least one new piece to offer his audience.

Three of Patton's recordings had surprisingly intricate accompaniments, considering their negligible place in his performing repertoire: *Green River Blues, Heart Like Railroad Steel*, and *Magnolia Blues*, a uniquely phrased bottleneck tune. These works established Patton as an exciting guitarist even when he was not galvanized by fast tempos, thanks to his phenomenal feel for tonal nuances and his exalted sense of rhythm. Another sublime session curiosity was *Some Of These Days*, a sentimental song that belonged to the realm of white music by virtue of its single measure phrasing pattern and major scale melody (which used phrase-ending cadences to major thirds and subdominants). The pallid ingredients of the song did not suggest Patton's syncopated One-Step treatment, and it is unlikely that white audiences of the time would have much appreciated the rollicking rhythm that elevated it above the status of a simple ditty.

Many of his recordings lacked the flashy technique and unorthodox arrangements that had characterized his first session material. His uptempo "cover" of *Jim Jackson's Kansas City Blues, Going To Move To Alabama*, for example, presented a basically conventional accompaniment that provided a smooth platform for his remarkably animated singing, which ranged an octave plus a second. The languid *Frankie and Albert* and *Hammock Blues* (misrendered by Paramount as *Hammer Blues*) were far removed from modern stereotypes of Delta blues-playing; though arranged with dance accenting patterns, Patton's low-key performances spotlighted their melodies.

Three ambitious adaptations demonstrated Patton's facility for song rearrangement. *Green River Blues* transformed the earliest guitar piece he learned into an original-sounding masterpiece. *Elder Greene* gave a "hard" blues twist to the placid *Alabama Bound*, an eight bar "rag" ditty that had been a standard twenty years before Patton recorded it. The impetus for Patton's rearrangement probably came from Blind Lemon Jefferson, who had performed an *Elder Green* around 1928 in Itta Bena, Booker Miller reported. The name "Elder Greene", invoked on Charlie Jackson's *I'm Alabama Bound* (1925), was a recurring but enigmatic allusion in black song. It is likely that he was a fictitious figure who was intended as the personification of a preacher: the phrase "lady green" had been a late 19th century slang term for a clergyman.[8]

Patton's transformation of *Pony Blues* into *Rattlesnake Blues* showed his ingenuity in remolding his own material. While preserving the accompaniment of its title verse almost in toto, Patton recast its basic tenor by changing his vocal attack to a boisterous bawling delivery and altering the melody by replacing major thirds and sixths with minor thirds and sevenths.[9] He introduced unexpected dynamic contrasts by muting treble figures as he shouted notes on the third beats of his phrases, and created gasping guitar sounds by damping tenth beat bass slides to and from the tonic.

In creating some of his second session pieces Patton simply cannibalized his own works. The verse-ending vocal phrase of *Tom Rushin'* became that of *Hammock*; the unusual verse-ending phrase of *Green River* (involving an augmented fourth) doubled as the concluding phrase of *Jim Lee*, a loose version of *Slidin' Delta* that ranged from 8 1/2 to 10 bars. *Magnolia Blues* was re-recorded as *When Your Way Gets Dark*.

Three of Patton's recordings had a palpably unfinished quality: *Mean Black Cat* (his only one chord secular accompaniment besides *Mississippi Bo Weavil*), *Devil Sent The Rain*, and *Joe Kirby*. Their arrangements pointed up Patton's method of blues assembly. Like *Mean Black Moan*, they are conventional twelve bar blues with stereotyped 10-6 vocal phrase/instrumental phrase divisions. In performing them Patton seems primarily concerned with establishing an expressive vocal attack. His instrumental preoccupation lies in embroidering his vocal line with guitar snippets; the vocal phrases are followed by simple tonic strums rather than with the intricate riffs of his more ambitious blues. None of these songs use the "overlay" technique of holding a phrase-ending word beyond the tenth beat of a line. It was probably only when Patton was fully at ease with material that he elongated its vocal phrases, and embroidered tonic strums with plucked guitar figures.[10]

Laibly's passivity as a recording director is indicated both by his willingness to indulge Patton's studio whimsies and the license he extended to Sims as a

singer, notwithstanding Sims' inexperience in this role. His sister Roberta never heard him sing any of the four titles he recorded for Paramount, or many songs at all. "...He wouldn't do much singin'," she reported, affirming Percy Thomas' recollection of him. "He always say he couldn't sing...that's the reason he didn't sing no more than he did."

Sims' amateurishness as a singer was betrayed by his thin, timorous, baritone delivery and disposition to doggeral ("Farrell blues, mama, sure don't worry me/It's all I want just to, see what a poor man do"). His method of marshalling tones attested to a lack of vocal development, and a possible removal from the milieu of black singing. In delivering all of his vocals he stayed within a single octave and used the keynote as his lowest tone. Except when Patton scoured the bottom of his register, the keynotes of his songs characteristically lay in the middle range of the tune itself, with the dominant below it serving as the lowest tone. Only in rendering the white-flavored ditties *Runnin' Wild* and *Some Of These Days* did Patton take Sims' square singing approach.

Nevertheless, Sims appears to have incorporated some of Patton's vocal wares and airs. With the exception of *Be True Be True* (a rendition of *Careless Love* that used the 1-2 square dance accenting pattern) all of his songs took the 1-2 pattern Patton featured in five of their duets. Three of his tunes (*Farrell, Tell Me Man,* and *Come Back Corinna*) were melodically akin to the first two vocal phrases of *Green River.* The final phrase of *Tell Me Man* began with the same descent from minor 7th to 5th that Patton used in rendering *Mean Black Cat.*

Despite the similarity between Sims' melodies and his own, Patton provided only run-of-the-mill bass strumming behind him. Apparently he considered it bad form to intrude upon Sims' show, or recognized that there was no glory in doing so. In either event, the strict time-keeping role he assumed was probably his typical style in accompanying other singers.

After the session, Sims sent his sister Roberta a letter from Detroit. Patton and Sims must have gone to that city with Charlie Spand, a Detroit blues pianist who had recorded three sides at Grafton before they began their session. On the morning after Sims' letter reached his sister the musicians themselves arrived at her home on Exchange Street in Memphis, carrying copies (perhaps test-pressings) of some of their records. She refused to listen to them in the belief that blues were sacrilegious.

Sims spoke of receiving $75 a side for his work, a figure that would indicate that Patton himself had pocketed $2,850 for his 1929 recordings. Patton's projected recording income would have catapulted him far above the average Mississippi wage-earner for the same year, who grossed $510. It was well above the median American income for 1929 ($1,760), and only two hundred dollars less than what the average American college professor earned that year.

Once they parted company, the musicians resumed their independent careers. A few weeks after his session, Patton was to find a new musical acquaintance in Son House. When asked in a 1966 interview if Patton had ever mentioned Sims, House replied: "Not as I knows of." He never learned that the two had ever played together, and remarked: "Charlie didn't play with *nobody* too much."

The rest of Sims' career was marked by only a single, modest respite from insignificance. While toiling on the Belmont plantation near Stovall in the summer of 1942, Sims and Percy Thomas were summoned by their foreman (a "Captain Holt") to a shack rented by Muddy Waters, another tenant of the plantation. There, joined by Louis Ford and "Pitty Pat", they were recorded by the Library of Congress. In 1946 Ford died in Rosedale from complications of untreated syphilis, and the Son Sims Four were three. The death of "Pitty Pat" in the same period signalled the end of the group. Sims continued playing ("mostly for white people", his sister remarks) for at least another decade, until a kidney stone condition necessitated several operations at the Memphis Veterans Hospital. Apparently left unattended after undergoing a biopsy, he choked to death in his hospital bed two days before Christmas in 1958. His grave in Clarksdale has no marker, and he left no descendants.

High Water And Dry Wells

"Old Charlie Patton, I liked them blues he play about he goin' down this old Jackson Road..You know, the *Backwater Blues*. An' he say: 'Water's backin' all up.' — Elizabeth Moore

The unsuccessful commercial debut of Henry Sims (and before him, Kid Bailey) demonstrated that Charlie Patton's celebrity was never contagious. Even when given recording exposure on his coat-tails his assorted cronies and imitators remained relative commercial nonentities. His first recorded imitator of the Thirties, Mattie Doyle, proved to be no exception.

Originally a choir singer in a Baptist congregation, the twenty-five year old Doyle was a relative newcomer to the field of secular music when she recorded in 1930. Raised in the southeast fringe of the Delta between Howard and Tchula (two small towns lying halfway between Greenwood and Yazoo City), she began playing guitar sometime around the year of the "high water", 1927. "...About three months after she started, she runned off: went to Memphis," her first cousin Lily Berry recalled. "They mother wasn't livin' and wasn't nobody but her daddy." Himself a church member, the elder Doyle was stricken by her dual defection from home and church. "He tried to find her...He never could catch up with her," Lilly said. In the apparent interests of eluding him she took the recording pseudonym of "Mattie Delaney" when she recorded two sides in Memphis for the Brunswick label in February of 1930.

She may have taken to street singing in Memphis, for she traded on the vagrant persona of the hobo street singer in *Down The Big Road*:

> My mother said six months 'fore I was born:
> She was gonna have a girl-child wouldn't never stay at home.
>
> I feel like cryin', ain't got no tears to spare
> I had a happy home, an' I wouldn't stay there.

Shortly before she abandoned it, her "happy home" had been rent by the tragic death of her older sister, a victim of gangrene brought on by failing to attend a cut she had sustained on her leg from a thorn.

At some point in her travels Mattie must have met Charlie Patton, for her song was a treatment of *Down The Dirt Road,* which was issued three months before her session. Like other contemporary renditions of Patton's material, it is relatively conventional and colorless. There is no doubt of her intention to copy Patton despite her transposition of his accompaniment from a C to G position (capoed to the key of A): she eccentrically sustains a single syllable word in the title lyric ("the" in the phrase "the big road") for an entire measure (from beats three to six), as does Patton in phrasing the equivalent lyric. The melody of her song used six notes and stressed major thirds where Patton had sung minor thirds. Its phrasing followed the "ten-six" blues stereotype, altered only by the omission of half-bar tonic strums (at the conclusion of the first and last vocalized verses) and the addition of two extra beats to the second line of the fourth vocal verse. Whereas Patton held the final word of each *Dirt Road* phrase for six beats, Doyle did so for only two.

Her *Tallahatchie River Blues* (a song in the D position based on the "ten/six" pattern) relied on the same intervals Patton used to create the first stanza of *Screamin' And Hollerin'*: the keynote, minor third, and minor seventh. However, she sang within a relatively restricted range (d^1-g^1) without the embellishments Patton brought to the melody. Its lyrics were more thematic than those of most dance blues:

> Tallahatchie River risin', Lord it's mighty bad
> Some peoples on Tallahatchie done, lost everything they had.
>
> The people in the Delta are wonderin' what to do
> They don't build some levees I don't know what become of you.
>
> High water risin', got me troubled in mind
> I got to stay here an' leave my daddy behind.

Tallahatchie River was quite likely suggested by the flood song Patton had recently recorded at Grafton. Patton's tune, an off-shoot of *Maggie*, quickly rivaled *Pony Blues* as his signature song and gave his recording career a respite from an otherwise certain termination when Paramount issued it as *High Water Everywhere* in April of 1930. "When he'd be playin' that piece," Willie Moore recalled, "they'd have to fling the girls *back*!"

The title was meant to evoke the famous Mississippi River flood that had occurred three years before Patton's record was issued. More than any other

Patton record, it manifested the tremendous vocal power and heavy guitar "beating" for which he was noted in live performance. "Just to see him in action with that record!" an awed Booker Miller exclaimed. "He just put so much into it!"

On *High Water Everywhere* Patton extended himself as no blues singer had seemingly done before, or has done since. On no recording except *Pony Blues* did he succeed so thoroughly in imposing his personality upon the blues structure, which no other blues singer approached his ability to subordinate to self-expression. In *Pony Blues* it is the musical magician who seems to be floating on air rather than treading the narrow path that is the blues idiom; in *High Water* the idiom is rendered invisible through histrionics (a full-voiced delivery, banter, heavy guitar-slapping, and foot-stomping) and spontaneity. Ultimately one does not think of it as a blues at all: it is Charlie Patton "in action", as in *Spoonful*, which it resembles as unique work of barrelhouse theatre. In both songs he mimics a variety of voices with such finesse that his own voice is lost in the process. But whereas *Spoonful* is playful, *High Water* is basically dramatic, and Patton's delivery has the tumultuousness of the flood itself, as it was no doubt intended to.

The subject itself was tailor-made for Patton, giving him license to invoke the place names he frequently used to inject realism into his couplets or make them more memorable to listeners. In constructing its verses Patton was less concerned with plotting a plausible story than with insinuating as many place names as possible into the song. The narrative is little more than a pretext for Patton's grand tour, which is undertaken with small regard for the trajectory of the actual flood.

In all likelihood Patton had sung a topical flood blues of some sort before recording *High Water*, and was resurrecting a discarded song subject in the studio. For he had not included it among the fourteen songs he had recorded on the first day of his session with Son Sims, and it is difficult to imagine him devising the entire song in a single setting. Moreover, the first and sixth verses refer to Tallahatchie River towns that were not involved in the Mississippi flood, inviting the supposition that *High Water* was an elaboration of a previous song about another flood.

Patton preceded the piece with a two-part *Jim Lee Blues* that presented him at his most orthodox and least flamboyant. It, too, was a river song, but one with a turn of the century tenor:

> The other day, *Jim Lee* keep a-backin' up an' down
> She sandbar stuck, man if you're water bound.

> ...The *Jim Lee*, up the river, *Stack* in Arkansas
> An' the sidewheel knockin': "Lord I'm water bound."

The *James Lee II* and the *Stacker Lee* had been among the fourteen steamboats operated by the Lee Line of Memphis, whose owner (Robert Edward Lee) named his entire fleet for his numerous sons. Songs about his boats had probably sprung into existence with the inception of his fleet in 1890, when it ran between Memphis and Friar's Point. (Later, the route was extended to Vicksburg.) In the late 1920s the Lee Line (which had merged with the Rosedale Packet Company in 1924) went out of business, and Patton's song may have been intentionally nostalgic. He embroiders what was a conventional accompaniment (better known as *East St. Louis* and *Slidin' Delta*) with small, effortless tricks, strumming at different dynamic levels and altering the closing cadences of the first vocal phrase, which variously end on the subdominant and the major second. With such devices he seemed to give a taste of what musical individuality in Mississippi amounted to in the days when there were no show stoppers like *High Water.*

The hallucinogenic effect of *High Water* is enhanced by the way Patton stages the song: it poses a desperate scramble for survival that recalls the flood's first thirty-six hours, when no part of the Delta promised a safe refuge:

> The backwater done rose around Sumner now, drove me down the line
> An' no tellin' what the water, done to (Joe Lee's?) town.
>
> Lord the whole 'round country Lord! river has overflowed
> "You know I can't be stayin' here; I'm — gotta go where it's high, boy!"
> I was goin' to the hilly country, 'fore they got me barred.

Son House recalled that Patton once mentioned being at Rolling Fork when the "high water" broke. He was certainly nowhere near Sumner (a Tallahatchie River town in the eastern Delta), for had he been, he would have been mindful of the fact that the flooding never reached that area. House thought that Patton's reference to being "barred" from the hill country meant that he was drafted for levee or rescue work, as were many plantation hands.

Most of the flood victims made no attempts at flight but passively awaited rescue boats to reach whatever rooftops, treetops, or Indian burial mounds offered them shelter. Those who did flee the area in Pattonesque fashion were later derided by the planter William Alexander Percy as "nonresidents from the hills who regarded the river hysterically...and the usual run of rabbit folk who absent themselves in every emergency."[1]

Patton's third verse was as incongruous as the first:

> Lookey here boys around Leland tell me, river was raisin' high
> "Boy it's risin' over there, y'hear?"
> I'm gonna move over to Greenville, 'fore I bid "Goodbye."

Greenville, which was to remain submerged in as much as twelve feet of water, was actually flooded before Leland, a town located ten miles to the east. It was the midnight collapse of the twenty-foot high levee at Stop's Landing eight miles above Greenville on April 21, 1927 that flooded the Delta.[2] Eventually the water would cover an area extending seventy-five miles above and beneath Greenville, and range fifty miles east of it. In the immediate wake of the Stop's Landing catastrophe, which left 75,000 Delta residents homeless and took the lives of about a hundred blacks, a futile attempt was made to sandbag the Leland levee. When four or five feet of water subsequently overran Leland, its 2500 residents (along with some 4000 refugees from outlying areas) took shelter in the center of town, which the flood did not touch.

At face value the third verse of *High Water* poses the unlikely picture of a refugee who flees a dry area (Leland) and heads in the direction of the flood. As Patton could hardly have envisioned a riverside town like Greenville serving as a flood haven, he was probably recollecting the use of its three mile levee as the main refugee center for blacks who had been displaced by the flood. Some twelve thousand such refugees would camp there for six weeks in tents provided by the War Department and Red Cross, sharing its cramped forty foot wide embankment with cattle nearly as numerous as themselves.

Evacuation to Greenville would end the peril faced by most of the flood survivors, and would have figured as the climax of a realistic "high water" account. Instead Patton continued:

> The water at Greenville—and Leland! Know it done rose everywhere
> "Boy, you can't never stay here!"

> I would go down to Rosedale, but they tell me water there.

The river town of Rosedale, twenty five miles northeast of *Dockery's*, may have figured in the song because Will Dockery (whose plantation, along with nearby Cleveland, was unscathed by the flood) had commandeered one of his straw bosses and a hundred of his tenants to assist in levee work there. Although the flooding extended from Rosedale to Vicksburg, Patton envisioned the latter town as a sanctuary:

> Well they tell me the water, done took short little town
> "Boy I'm goin' to Vicksburg!"
> Well I'm goin' to Vicksburg, over that higher mound.[3]

The basis of this couplet was probably the evacuation of a thousand refugees from the Greenville to the Vicksburg levee, six days before the latter town was overrun by water on April 30th. Most of these refugees were white: a group of Red Cross steamers intended for the removal of blacks was prevented from leaving Greenville by influential planters who feared that their tenants would never return.[4]

The garbled sixth verse involved a return to the area of Sumner:

> Well I am goin' over the hill where water, oh it don't never flow
> "Boy, Sharkey County an' everything was down in Stover"
> (Bolivar County?) was inchin', over that Tallahatchie skid.[5]
> "Boy went in Tallahatchie to find it over there!"

Stover lies about seven miles northeast of Sumner, far removed from the flood scene. The concluding couplet, which appears to refer to Highway 49, had no basis in fact:

> Lord the water done rushed over, down old Jackson road
> "Boy it starched my clothes!"
> I'm goin' back to the hilly country, won't be worried no more.

As a version of *Maggie*, Patton's accompaniment is noteworthy for its speed and inimitable guitar-slapping. Thanks to its surging tempo, part one of *High Water* was less fluid and responsive to his vocal than the accompaniment of *Screamin' And Hollerin'*. The final measure of each stanza-ending vocal phrase bore no accompaniment other than foot-tapping. Whereas *Screamin' And Hollerin'* used three different instrumental figures to accompany the initial vocal phrase of its various stanzas, part one of *High Water* used two. In the first stanza Patton played an embellishment of the descending bass Willie Brown would record on *Future Blues*, slapping the guitar as well as snapping the low E string in Brown's fashion. The equivalent part of the rest of the song used similar slaps to accompany repeated treble tonic notes (probably played on the B string) that cascaded into strummed tonic chords. Whereas the *Screamin' And Hollerin'* bass is a full measure, Patton's equivalent *High Water* figure is a repeated two beat riff, beginning on the second beat and extended two beats beyond the vocal it accompanies. The filler riff that set off the second and third vocal phrases amounted to two measures, rather than the three that *Screamin' And Hollerin'* featured. The guitar figure he used during the stanza-ending vocal phrases (a strummed V chord beginning on the second beat, and followed by bass eighths on the sixth beat) was taken verbatim from *Heart Like Railroad Steel*, which Patton had recorded the previous day and pitched in a lower key (B as opposed to C).

Perhaps because he sang untested lyrics, Patton's vocal phrasing made several slapdash departures from its ten beat model. The opening phrase of the song consisted of three vocal measures, while eleven and nine beat phrases variously opened the fourth and sixth verses.

The real freedom that Patton's song evinces lies in its vocal melody rather than phrasing. Thanks to his use of a relatively set accompaniment, he was able to sing with real abandon. While *Screamin' And Hollerin'* ranged an octave, *High Water* ranged an additional fifth (from C^{o} to g^{1}). While the first and second vocal phrases of *Screamin' And Hollerin'* are frequently identical, such is not the rule of *High Water*; if one of its phrases begins on an augmented fourth, the second phrase often begins a half-tone lower. Whereas all of the vocal phrases of *Screamin' And Hollerin'* have keynote phrase endings, some phrases of *High Water* end on minor thirds. The first phrase of its fourth stanza ends on a major third, while the second phrase of the final stanza ends on a dominant.

When Paramount would advertise *High Water Everywhere* in the *Chicago Defender* it would assert: "Everyone who has heard this record says that 'High Water Everywhere' is Charley Patton's best piece and you know that means it has to be mighty good because he has made some knockouts." Laibly's enthusiasm for the song apparently led him to solicit a second part from Patton:

Booker Miller never heard Patton sing the lyrics of *High Water Everywhere Part Two* or play its arrangement. "That's a new one," he said of the record. "...I never heard him play it that slow. You know, he always 'moved out' on the guitar." Miller added: "That sure is music, though!"

High Water Part Two may have sounded anti-climactic when set beside its predecessor, but when considered as a separate work its remarkability becomes apparent. With the possible exception of *Prayer Of Death* it stands as the least rehearsed of Patton's recordings. For the most part Patton used spontaneity as a spice; the general ingredients of his performaces were tried and tested. In the second part of *High Water,* one senses, Patton had no idea how he meant to proceed beyond the opening verse. The result is a unique event in recorded blues history: a completely spur-of-the-moment dance accompaniment. It was probably the basic spontaneity of the song that led Patton to begin it at a slow tempo, and the way he gains momentum as he settles into his work is thrilling to behold.

Though Patton draws upon his own *High Water* I, he uses no script. In the first two verses he accompanies his initial vocal phrase with a bass segment he had used in the second, third, and fifth verses of *Heart Like Railroad Steel,* involving a bass tonic note plucked (with a heavy vibrato) on every other beat, and extended for three measures beyond the vocal it accompanied. In the third verse Patton accompanies the same phrase with a series of muted sixth string snaps (alternating between a minor seventh and major sixth) sounded on each beat. In the fourth and sixth verses he grafts the initial accompaniment phrase of *High Water Part One,* but extends it (for four and three beats) beyond the conclusion of the vocal phrase. His treatment of the IV and V chords that accompany the second and third vocal phrases of each verse is similarly unscripted; for example, he plays the V chord of the first stanza as a two beat guitar roll and the IV^7 of the fourth stanza as a triplet roll beginning on the sixth beat. It is unfortunate that the Patton who provides an arresting view of himself as an impromptu performer should be fatigued by his stupendous exertions from *High Water Part One,* to the point of finding his fingers resistant to the relatively simple bass exercise of *Railroad Steel.* While repeating this phrase in the fifth verse of the song, Patton is not only barely audible, but misses the notes altogether on the fifth and sixth beats, thanks to a thumb that has been tortured to near inertness.

Patton seems to have exploited his fatigue by making it an ingredient of his actual performance: at the end of a vocal phrase in the fourth verse he literally gasps, adding a vivid sound effect to his portrayal of a terrified flood victim:

I hear the roar! Water up on my door!
I hear the ice, Lord went sinkin' down (gasp)
I couldn't get no local, Marion City gone down.[6]

Patton's generally wooley sound on this part of the record prompted H.C. Speir to observe: "He's about drunk now...You can hear it." Yet it is uncertain that liquor distorted Patton's delivery, which Speir characterized as "pretty well tongue-tied." He was probably improvising not only his accompaniment but his lyrics as well, and under the circumstances could hardly have devised a smooth delivery. Most of his couplets are held together by the bare thread of rhyme:

...Backwater at Blytheville, done took Joiner town
It were fifty families an' chillun, come to sink an' drown.

The water was risin' up at my front door
The water were risin', up in my friend's door
Some men says to these womenfolk: "Lord we'd better go."

The water was risin', got up in my bed
Lord the water it rollin', got up to my bed
I thought I would take a trip Lord, out on a big ice sled.[7]

...So high the water risin', I been sinkin' down
Then the water was risin', at places all around
"Boy they'se all *around*!"
It were fifty men an' chillun, come to sink an' drown.

Oh Lordie! Women an' grown men down
Oh! Women an' children sinkin' down
"Lord have mercy!"
I could see no one home well, was no one to be found.

Perhaps Patton based this work on the tale of some Arkansas acquaintance who had spoken of fifty people drowning; its factual basis is obscure. Blytheville

had become flooded by the collapse of the New Madrid, Missouri levee and served as a refugee camp, housing 4500 homeless persons. In the wake of the disaster no one knew how many blacks in the vicinity had been killed. A phone operator at Clarendon, Arkansas (ninety miles below Blytheville) said:

> We couldn't warn them yesterday when we telephoned our subscribers. They had no telephones... We don't know what happened to them. Negroes are coming out of the lowlands in boat loads. We don't know how many drowned. Cries and screams were heard from that section of town.[8]

Blues is essentially an undramatic medium, and one that is generally devoid of genuine vocal expressiveness. A singer will employ a set delivery that bears no real correspondence to his lyrics. The dramatic character of Patton's performance gives it an aura unlike that of any other blues song, though Patton ultimately trivializes his emotive treatment with buffoonish vocal asides in its last two verses. Each verse has an individual vocal interpretation of the lyrics it poses, and when Patton suddenly shifts to the present tense in the fourth verse ("I hear the roar! Water up on my door!") his intensified delivery makes the narrator sound like a living figure who is terrified by the threat of imminent extinction.

Patton's dramatic delivery of *High Water Everywhere Part Two* probably represents the most refined specimen of blues singing ever recorded. It is inexplicable as the product of the same noisy dance setting that Mattie Doyle and countless hack blues-players catered to, where musicians were judged largely for their ability to impose themselves on a crowd with sheer volume.

The limitations of this milieu are evident in his studio composition *Dry Well*, which was no doubt inspired by the success of *High Water Everywhere*. The catastrophe Patton depicted was the 1930 drought that had become the worst drought in the nation's history when he turned his attention to it that spring. Although less dramatic than the "high water", its effects were more baneful. In most areas the "high water" only temporarily disrupted farming, for crops were "muddied in" as the water receded. The drought continued for over a year and dealt fatal blows to countless farmers who were already contending with the Depression. When Patton recorded his song the drought was also accompanied by a suffocating heat wave that may make for an allusion in the first verse. In Arkansas, wrote one observer, "the thermometer reached or exceeded 100° for 42 of 43 consecutive days; rainfall for 100 days was not enough 'to wet a man's shirt.'"[9]

Patton dramatized a national crisis that swept thirty states (from Pennsylvania to Montana) within a single provincial setting across the Mississippi from Arkansas:

Way down in Lula, (hundred an' ten heat?)
Lord the drought come an' caught us an' parched up all the trees.

...Cities around Lula, all was doin' very well
Now they're in hard luck together 'cause, rain don't flow nowhere.

...Boy they tell me the country, Lord it'll make you cry
(Coahoma) country, Lord it'll make you cry...

Patton shouts the words with a seriousness that is notable for him, but they are largely lost amidst the incessant blare of Willie Brown's One Step accompaniment.

Grafton

"Son House, he got his pattern from Patton and Brown; when he come along I had done quit it."—Hayes McMullen

The Coahoma County river town of Lula, which lay two train stops southeast of *Jefferies* plantation and eight miles southwest of Helena, Arkansas, became Patton's home in the wake of his second recording session. Though it had no paved streets and was readily dismissed by Son House as "nothin' but a little flagstop— wasn't nothin' to it," it was a fair-sized Delta hamlet, numbering 450 people (as opposed to the hundred residents who constituted the population of *Jefferies*) in 1930. In previous decades Patton had periodically attached himself to its outlying plantations: "He stayed up there around Lula two-three times," his nephew Tom Cannon reported. In the spring of 1930 he lived on a neighboring plantation in a shack House situates as "four-five miles outta town, way out next to that levee there...way out next to the water."

His new residence was also that of his latest mistress, a twenty-eight year old woman named Bertha Lee Jones (nee Pate), for whom he had abandoned a "nice-lookin' tall woman" (as David Edwards described her) from Merigold named Bessie. "We all called her 'Bert'," Edwards says of Bertha Lee. "...She was nice-lookin', too: he had every nice-lookin' woman."

"Bert" had moved to the Lula vicinity from her native Flora as a five year old, around the time that Patton, already in his teens, was romancing Roxie Gibson there. (Roxie herself left *Dockery's* for an unknown destination around 1930 and was never to return.) She had spent most of her subsequent life on a plantation between Lula and Dundee, a Tunica County town about five miles north of Lula. "She was livin' there with her auntie," her former neighbor Elizabeth Moore recalled. "Her auntie raised her." In the mid-1920s she sang in the choir of Lula's First Baptist Church, but had become a "pretty rough" person in Elizabeth's eyes by the time she met Patton, probably in the spring of 1930: "...She shot the dice Saturday nights, you know; keep up with them jukes." Son House came to consider her a "high stepper", but she seems to have been a low stepper by comparison with her common-law husband, whom she would eventually revile on *Mind Reader Blues:*

> An' I remember the days when I was livin' in Lula town
> My man done so many wrong things till I had to leave the town.

Although Patton and Bertha Lee would remain together for some four years, their affair was memorable to outsiders only for its pugnacity. "All they done was fight all the time...Charlie was a hell-raiser," David Edwards reports. The storminess of their relationship probably had no effect on Patton's disposition to perpetuate it, because his life-style would have inevitably occasioned clashes with partners who would have been acceptable to him. According to House he "made a dunce outta her" during their days in Lula. "He wasn't that crazy about her," House said. House thought that he exaggerated his affections as a means of veiling his true interests, which lay in the food she stole from the planter who employed her as a cook. "He wouldn't even give Bertha no money much...He wouldn't even buy food half the time...he'd wait on her to come from the white folks' kitchen and bring him his food. That's the way he ate, out the white folks' kitchen."[1]

Although Joe Rice Dockery would shrug off the proverbial "basket habit" of the plantation cook as "part of the plantation game" that Delta planters took for granted, it was no doubt a hazardous one for a cook to undertake in a time of drought and Depression, and Patton seems to have done his best to conceal Bertha's light-fingeredness from casual Lula acquaintances. To one localite he complained: "She's starvin' me; she's killin' me," creating such a convincing impression of victimization that that his listener (in an interview three decades later) attributed Patton's death to starvation and held Bertha Lee responsible for his demise.

If Patton's undernourished appearance lent plausibility to such a charade, he had a formidable appetite that Bertha did her best to cater to: "Man, he'd eat a cow and a half and a bull and a half!" House marveled. "...Every time Bertha'd get ready to kill a chicken or somethin', wasn't no use of goin' out to get *one*; she always had to come back with nothin' *under* two. He *crazy* about guineas..." Unwittingly, his commercial sponsors would caricature his zest for food by misconstruing *Spoonful* (a song about cocaine) as a song about soup. Their cartoon advertisement for the record, which appeared in the January 11, 1930 edition of *The Chicago Defender*, depicted Patton at a restaurant table, bearing a pained look as he waited for service. Their February 1st depiction of Patton's sixth release, *Pea Vine* (referring to a train), showed a cluster of peas.

Paramount seems to have been less concerned with the content of Patton's songs than with his status as "a famous artist", a phrase that recurs in these

advertisements. Even without his singular fame in the Delta to bolster him, he would have had the local barrelhouse territory largely to himself. Lula's retinue of local musicians consisted of a female blues pianist known as "Piano Playin' Willie" and a family band featuring guitar and bass fiddle. The town's only previous blues guitarist of memory, a man named Rennis Glisson, had left Lula in shackles in 1917. "He had a wife named Doug," his one-time playing partner Willie Moore said, "an' he cut her head off and they sent him to Parchman for life."

It was a recent Parchman alumnus, Son House, who would provide Patton with his only professional companionship in Lula. House had few career or musical credentials when he met Patton, but his distaste for plantation labor and his taste for corn liquor had drawn him to professional blues-singing. His early religiosity made him contemptuous of blues-playing before he drunkenly turned to it at a 1926 house "frolic" in his native Lyon: "I didn't like no guitar when I first heard it; oh gee, I couldn't stand a guy playin' a guitar...I didn't like *none* of it." True to the popular axiom that blues-singing boded "trouble", House (in 1928 or 1929) was sent to Parchman after shooting a man at a Saturday night "frolic" in Lyon. His sentence was terminated after two years, thanks to the lobbying of his parents. Taken to Clarksdale in late 1929 or early 1930, he was warned by a judge never to set foot in town again. "I told him I could cover as much territory as a red fox if he turned me loose," House recalled, "so I walked to Jonestown and caught a ride to Lula. Then I run up on this woman, Sara Knights. She heard me playing over there at the train station. She wanted me to come over to her place and play some to draw a crowd. That's the way 'that' started."

"That," House explains, was the beginning of a successful scheme to siphon off the profits Sara earned from selling bootleg whiskey by "talking trash" (feigning affection) a la Charlie Patton: "...She run a little restaurant not far from this train station. I'm playin' Charlie Patton now with her. She's running a restaurant and I sure want to get in with her."

House had been more eager to "play" Charlie Patton than to meet Patton, whom he had first set eyes on at the Lula depot, "clowning and running his mouth and talking as usual...telling funny lies and things like that." Though Patton had paid no apparent attention to House's depot performance, the crowd House managed to collect on the porch of Sara Knight's cafe evidently encouraged him to think that they might do business together: "He looked over and saw me playin' over there, and he come over, and that's what got us teamed up. Then he wanted me to play with him for Big Sis."

"Big Sis" was a three hundred pound woman who went by the last names of Brock and Williams and operated a jukehouse near the levee at Powell, a

town between Lula and *Jefferies*. When Patton met House he held down a franchise there.

At this point the association of Patton and House assumes a hazy aspect. As the first of Patton's associates to be interviewed by researchers, House was asked more questions about Patton than about his own lesser career. In 1966 he stated: "...Near about ever Saturday night me and him would play together." In a 1969 interview, however, he noted that he had never played for dance audiences in Lyon or Lula, and recalled that Patton catered primarily to white audiences in Lula: "They liked him for his clownin'; they like-ted that. He could dish that *out*, man!" Indeed, scrutiny of House's 1930 recordings makes it abundantly clear that House and Patton never teamed up at a Lula jukehouse.

Patton had numerous fly-by-night accompanists, as when (in the late 1920s) Willie Moore and Willie Brown ran across him in Hollandale. Moore recalled: "He says: 'Fella,' says: '...if I could get you all down here tonight I could make some good money; then I'd come up the next time, help you if it would be possible.'" On originally being approached by Moore for such work a dozen years previously, Patton put him through the paces of an audition before pronouncing him satisfactory.

When dance blues singers pooled their talents at jukehouses or house "frolics" their roles were cut-and-dried. One musician sang and accompanied himself as though a soloist; the other supplied "complement" guitar. In neither role could House and Patton have meshed. House's three extant recordings of the period consist of one chord bottleneck pieces, none of them taking on conventional blues phrasing patterns or employing dance accenting patterns. It is doubtful that Patton could have followed such pieces, and House's musicianship was too limited to allow him to accompany Patton. At most House could have put in an appearance for "Big Sis" as an intermission guitarist.[2]

House's removal from the sphere of dance music led him to assess Patton's songs solely in terms of their lyrics: "He'd take all them old foolish songs and things...Some of them would sound all right...Some of them had a meaning to them...some didn't. That's the way he played: he'd just say anything, the first thing he could think of: 'Hey baby,'...and all that old kind of funny stuff." It did not even occur to him that Patton's lyrics scanned according to rhythm patterns.

Just as there was undoubtedly less to their professional relationship than House originally let on, so was there obviously more to their social relationship than House later intimated. The two made an unlikely pair: while Patton was an incorrigible kidder who "didn't believe in what he's sayin' his-self," House was a relatively gloomy man who was guilt-ridden about singing blues. They passed considerable time as drinking companions, and their friendship on

House's part was (he stated) solely due to Patton's generosity with a liquor bottle: "He wouldn't hide *that* from me. No, he wanted me to have *that.*" In later years a hapless alcoholic, House even then prided himself on his ability to outdrink his crony: "In the run of the night, Charlie couldn't just say *drink* corn liquor...he couldn't drink much of that."

House's association with Patton was nothing if not underhanded, for when he surfaced as a blues rediscovery he never tired of biting the hand that once supplied him. Though his reminiscences of Patton had real historical value, they were nonetheless resentful ones, as his customary characterizations of Patton as a "jerk" and a "shit-ass" indicated. One is inclined to suspect that Patton found House's company objectionable on some level, and that House never recovered from this slight. His comments concerning Patton's cheapness smack of nothing so much as the complaint of an unsuccessful borrower, and it may have been that Patton considered House a sponge. Perhaps House expected their acquaintance to blossom into a professional association of some sort, only to discover what Booker Miller learned as Patton's understudy: "If you didn't do it right now, he just don't harbor with you." That House smarted from Patton's reception of his music is indicated by his claim: "I never did hear him act like he's interested in other guys' playin'...Charlie, he was the most self-conceited guy: he liked his-self, the way he played, but somebody else; he wouldn't hardly look around at him." Regarding his own songs, which amounted to virtually three tunes (*My Black Mama*, *Preachin' The Blues*, and *Dry Spell Blues*), House said that Patton "never would play none of them."

House in turn affected an aversion for Patton's music: "...*High Water Everywhere*...that's the onliest one I liked for myself." He professed to find only its lyrics appealing. Yet he would ultimately play crude versions of this accompaniment (using lyrics borrowed from Willie Brown), *Pony Blues*, *Pea Vine*, and *Banty Rooster.* Obviously House became disenchanted with Patton's music after finding himself unable to play it, or Patton unwilling to assist him with it. Whatever its causes, his hostility to Patton's music prevented him from learning from it. While he prided himself on having a better voice than Patton, his singing remained relatively untutored; his *Preachin' Blues* was cut from the same melodic mold as Patton's *Maggie*, but struck three repetitive tones.

House would have languished in perpetual obscurity had Charlie Patton not seen fit to pull strings on his behalf, either because he appreciated his music or considered it socially politic to do so.

In April or May of 1930, one afternoon's tedium at the Lula depot was relieved by the arrival of a white stranger in a business suit. Stepping off a Texas-bound train, the man held a brief conversation with Patton. "After he left, Charlie come on 'cross there (i.e., the main street of town) and told me

what he said." This news involved another recording session for Patton, House learned. "...Charlie told him about me...so he told Charlie then he wanted me to come with him. I said: 'What?' He say: 'Yeah, he want you to come with me.' I say: 'Yeah, sho' I go, man.'"

The recording proposition had been put forth by Arthur Laibly, whom House would mistake for Patton's "personal manager." In response to the demand for *High Water Everywhere*, the first release from Patton's second session, Laibly had wired H. C. Speir to arrange for his return to Grafton. When business commitments made a trip to Lula impractical for Speir, Laibly took matters into his own hands, evidently wiring Patton of his intended stopover in town. Then, on the word of an artist who had just presented his company with a sales flop (Henry Sims), Laibly gave Patton blanket approval to recruit other musicians for the forthcoming session, and handed him (House recalled) a hundred dollars for their combined travel expenses.

Only one of the acts Patton subsequently garnished might have previously been familiar to Laibly, an *a cappella* gospel group known as the Delta Big Four. Between the time of his second session and Laibly's stopover in Lula Patton had taken them to H. C. Speir's music store for the purpose of making an audition record. "First Baptist Church in Lula, that's where they demonstrated all the time," recalls Elizabeth Moore, who also heard them sing with Son House's girl friend Sara Knights. The quartet's leader and senior member, thirty-five year old Wheeler Ford, was a local crony of Patton's, a distinction he may have earned by owning an automobile. Their singing was to make no impression on Speir or OKeh Records, which rejected the three members Speir was to audition for a company representative in St. Louis while driving back from Grafton.

Laibly's haste in arranging another session for Patton is no less curious than his rote approval of his finds, for his label still had a backlog of at least seventeen sides from the previous Patton session. The one-year contract Patton should have signed on the day of his recording debut (June 14, 1929) was approaching expiration, and must have figured prominently in Laibly's plans. While he may have wanted to get the maximum benefit of it by tapping Patton for more material before it expired, it is more likely that he wished to offer Patton another one, so that he would not sell his services elsewhere over the coming months. Such a supposition would explain the fact that Patton was subsequently to record but four known titles, and take a studio backseat to the relatively unknown House, who recorded at least twice as many.

By the spring of 1930 Patton had become Paramount's only recording star, thanks to the death of Blind Lemon Jefferson the previous December. Laibly was desperate for appealing talent, and this circumstance may explain his

willingness to approve Patton's scouting suggestions. So far that year he had gotten few results from the recommendations of Speir, the only dealer who was then regularly providing him with talent. In February, Speir had furnished Laibly with a Lake Providence, Louisiana street singer who recorded as Blind Joe Reynolds. Speir later said that he had garnished the singer's sessions (which included an appearance for Victor later that year) because he felt sorry for him. In March, Speir had sent the label two Victor cast-offs, Tommy Johnson and Ishmon Bracey. Johnson, Speir noted, "was pretty hard to keep sober," a fact Laibly discovered when he passed two weeks at Grafton in a state of such drunkenness that he was able to record only a half-dozen tunes. It was not until July that Laibly would issue the first of Johnson's recordings (the appropriately titled *Alcohol and Jake Blues*), an indication that he saw no sales value in them.

Though the Depression was already suffocating the record business ("In '29 it stopped right quick," Laibly would say of record sales), two exceptional breakthroughs pointed up Mississippi as a good place to go blues prospecting. On the day before Mattie Delaney recorded for Brunswick in Memphis, Memphis Minnie appeared in the same makeshift studio and recorded the best-selling *Bumble Bee*, a slow-paced ode to sex that was sung without a strong dance pulse.

Three days before *Bumble Bee* was recorded, another unheralded duo produced an even bigger hit at a "field" session. The musicians, Walter Vinson and violinist Lonnie Chatmon, played exclusively for white dances in Mississippi. While practicing for one such dance in Itta Bena, Vinson began puttering with a nine bar ditty, *Sitting On Top Of The World*, causing his partner to wonder aloud: "What kind of song is that?"

Discovered by Ralph Lembo in Itta Bena, they were dispatched to Shreveport, where Polk Brockman of OKeh Records was attempting to make a celebrity recording of the city mayor, a crony of Huey Long's who crooned *Hello, World*. "...He was harder to get to than the president of the United States was," Brockman remembered. As he was setting up equipment on the roof of a local hotel, Vinson and Chatmon presented themselves to him. "...They just came in, unannounced and everything," said Brockman, who was mildly impressed by the addition of violin that distinguished them from "the same old guitar and singing deal."

"If it hadn't been for them I'd a-lost my shirt on that *Hello, World* deal," Brockman recalled. Despite its incongruity ("Wasn't nobody sittin' on top of the world in those days," Brockman snorted), Vinson's ditty became one of the most popular "race" recordings of the era. Reflecting on the success of the Mississippi Sheiks, Brockman said: "I've always said it wasn't the things

you planned in recording. The biggest things were accidents...somethin' that just strayed along." Such was no doubt the view of Laibly, who owed his position to the unlikely promotion of Blind Lemon Jefferson by a dealer he serviced. Since then he had been running a catch-can operation: "The only thing Laibly was doin," Speir said, "was tryin' to stay in business, hopin' that somethin' was gonna happen."

Some three days after Laibly's departure from Lula, Patton paid an evening visit to the *Frank Harbart* plantation near Robinsonville. He returned to Lula with Willie Brown, who was then living on the plantation (the largest one in the Robinsonville area) with a heavy-set woman named Susie. "We set up all that night," recalled House, who had never previously laid eyes on Brown, "...drinking and practicing, you know; playing together."

In the late 1920s, Ernest Brown reported, Patton and Brown had been a frequent team, playing "from Robinsonville plum to Walls." Patton's interest in Bertha Lee had apparently put an end to this collaboration several months before they regrouped on the eve of their session: ...A woman, I think, split 'em up," Brown observed. "...They told me, Charlie Patton just got crazy about that woman an' he was just followin' her and him and Willie Brown kinda split up."

Following their all-night rehearsal the three musicians packed their Stella guitars in Wheeler Ford's Buick and set out for Grafton. "...He (Ford) knowed the way and directions," Son House recalled. Evidently by prearrangement, Ford made a quick detour to the *Kirby* plantation north of Robinsonville, of which Patton had sung on his previous session, impressing Paramount so little in the process that the work (titled *Joe Kirby*) would remain unissued for some two years. A young woman stepped into the front seat beside Patton. "We circled 'round there and went by there and picked her up and kept a-goin'," House said.

The car's new passenger, House discovered, was Louise Johnson, Patton's "side track" (secondary mistress). House thought that Patton had taken up with her before moving in with Bertha Lee, in which event he had likely met her while playing with Willie Brown, who had formerly lived on *Kirby*. "...He lived there on Mister Kirby's plantation an' he used to tell us: 'I'm makin' this song up on this Joe Kirby,'" Willie Moore recounted. "We said: 'Man, better not let *some* people 'round here — better not let that *white* man hear you, 'fore you be in jail!" Patton's own song had been used to air his infatuation with Louise Johnson:

> I'm goin' where Green River do run down
> 'Cause the one I love mama, live in Robinsonville
> town.

House assessed her as a "nice-lookin' old gal," despite the fact that "her hair was short, you know: look like she been had a man's haircut in them days." In House's view "she wasn't...'bout twenty-three, twenty-four years old. She's kinda young."

Like her boyfriend, she "didn't do nothin' but drink and play music; she didn't work for nobody..." She sounded as though she had either taken singing lessons from Patton, or had absorbed his approach by accompanying him. Two of the songs she was to record for Paramount, *All Night Long* and *Long Ways From Home*, were simplified vocal renditions of *Maggie*, set to F# major. On two verses of these songs she emulated Patton by beginning the second phrase of a stanza with a sudden rise from the augmented fourth to dominant, which imposed a real strain on her voice. Her tendency to yank notes from the top of her register (which ranged from $C\#^1$ to $C\#^2$ on recording) and to implement her delivery with a semblance of a growl also seemed to reflect Patton's influence, which was not necessarily positive as she did not have a particularly suitable voice for the style she employed. Nevertheless, House regarded her as a better singer than Bertha Lee (which she clearly was not). Of her playing, he said: "She could eat a piano up." Though she had a sporadic left hand that was not always integrated with her treble work, her right hand effected a "talking" style of mimicking her vocal accenting that was closer to the approach of a blues guitarist than pianist.

In advance of Patton's party, which was to make another stop at Kankakee, Illinois to visit a guitar-playing friend of Wheeler Ford's, H. C. Speir had already visited Lula to pick up the three lesser members of the Delta Big Four. En route to Lula he made a fruitless detour to Anguilla in search of Bo Chatmon, whom he intended to bring to the forthcoming session. Over the remainder of the drive (which he made by way of Rockport, Illinois in order to bypass Chicago traffic) his nostrils smarted from the presence of his unwashed cargo; his car, he would sourly complain decades later, stank for a month after the session. Wheeler Ford's car, on the other hand, reeked of cheap liquor. As House recalls: "...After we left Memphis, Tennessee we stopped at another place just north of Memphis and we bought some liquor...We all drinkin' except Wheeler Ford: he didn't drink none."

As the musicians drank, they argued. At one point Patton ordered Ford to stop his car so he and Willie Brown could settle their differences with fists. This command was roundly ignored. An argument between Patton and Louise Johnson culminated in a slap from Patton, causing Louise to climb into the back seat next to House. "That's when 'it' went to happen...," House recalled.

"It" happened between snorts of liquor: "...I got a-snortin'; she'd take one...Charlie, he mad—he's sittin' in the front...I commence to leanin' over,

'talkin' trash' to her. I say: 'I really kinda like you, gal,' and we take another big swallow. And so when we got to Grafton, Charlie didn't know I had done 'made' her."

Nor did House, until they reached a boarding house next to the Grafton recording studio in which Paramount lodged its artists. "We all stayed in the same hotel..when I come upstairs, say: 'Where's the man have my key?'

"Louise says to me: 'Say, *I* got our key!'

"I say: '*Our?*' What you mean, 'our?'

"She says: '*Yours*, you jerk you!'

"I say: 'Oh! 'Scuse *me*, honey!' I say: 'All right! Okie-*doak*!' I say: 'Oh, brother! It's my old pal's used-to-be woman.' Well, I didn't know *how* that was comin' out."

House was to find out when his "old pal" (of perhaps three months) drew him aside before their recording sessions began the next morning.

"I said: 'Now Charlie—what you want (i.e., a fight) I ain't for it right now; I ain't ready for that kinda stuff.'

"'Oh come here, nigger! I ain't thinkin' about that little old 'tight-haired' (i.e., short-haired) woman!'

"I said: 'Oh, well ain'tcha? Now listen, Charlie...I don't like it; you'll have to excuse me, look over (i.e. overlook) me for that.'

"Listen—*listen*, fella! I didn't want her in the *first* place! Now you keep her now and I'll treat you as good as I ever is! Go on and just act like there ain't nothin' happenin'."

Though it was doubtless inadvertent, the basic lack of regard all three male bluesmen had for Louise Johnson is evident from their disruptive studio patter during the two songs with which she began the session. The cavalierness with which they interrupt her singing and upstage her performance with flip comments belies House's claim that their presence was intended merely to sooth her studio jitters; House's own contributions mock his pious claim that "blues ain't for no clownin'." It must have required considerable poise on her part to brazen out her pieces. On *Long Way From Home* she seems to be ultimately overwhelmed by their distractions, sputtering out after taking a twelve bar break at the conclusion of the fourth verse. It is a wonder Laibly ever issued this performance, let alone made it the first blues release of the session.

In the process of retailing pure mayhem, Paramount gathered a unique document, displaying Charlie Patton's style of barrelhouse histrionics. According to Booker Miller, his patter on Johnson's record reflected his typical behavior in the midst of other blues singers: "...He'd talk all the time when he go to gettin' 'heavy', you know, drinkin', and that dance go to gettin' good, late in the evenin'. Man, he could put on a good show, then."

Patton's boisterous "show", as excerpted from the records, runs as follows:

"Do it a long time, baby!"
"Do it a long time; good and wild; good and wild!"
"Aw, sho', now!"
"Hey-hey-hey!"
"Lordie have mercy!"
"Ain't that a *shame*!"
"Goin' back to where I'm — I'm goin' back *home!*"
"Baby I ain't gonna do it no more!"
"Come over here, woman!"
"Hey, hey!"
(All Night Long Blues)

"Play 'em a long time, baby!"
"Play 'em all night long!"
"Good and wild, good and wild!"
"Tell 'em what happened to you!"
"Get right, get right!"
"Lord, what a *shame!*"
"Sho' enough, baby!"
"Have a fit, baby, have a fit!"
"Boy, let's have a party!"
"Sink 'em down there, sink 'em; whup it on down; play the board, baby!"
"I know it's achin' — Hey, hey!"
"You'll get through playin' directly!"
"I'm goin' back home!"
"Play 'em!"
"Them blues won't behave, baby!"
"Oh play 'em, Miss Piano-Whupper!"
"Aw, sho'!"
"Don't give 'em another verse, now."
(*Long Way From Home*)

Despite the late-night flavor of these antics, the musicians did all their recording in the morning. "We'd go down to the studio at nine o'clock in the morning, and 'round about twelve we'd come back," House recalls. Their work was jointly supervised by Laibly and H. C. Speir, who recorded two spoken monologues for the amusement of friends[3] and used the occasion of his visit

to help Laibly renovate the studio, the acoustics of which vexed the company. "You couldn't do nothin' with that old building," Speir said. "Man, that building...It was an old rock building, big rooms...all square and everything like that...You had dampness in there all the time; you can't have dampness when you're recording...that dampness, even if it wasn't but just a small degree, it'd throw the sound off a little, you see."

Thanks partly to the studio alterations (which included the introduction of sliding panels to reduce the size of the recording room), relatively little recording took place in proportion to the amount of time the musicians spent in Grafton. Over a period of from four to six days, the four blues acts produced but twenty-one known titles. Each performer took two turns, with the apparent exception of Patton, who ended the session with four duets with Brown. Louise Johnson recorded four titles, as did Brown, whose voice, House said, did not impress Laibly. House recorded nine sides, which amounted to six actual songs, as three of his works were two-part duplications.[4]

The musicians used themselves as an audience: "We'd all be in the same big room," House recalls. "While one was in front of the mike the other one was sittin' over there...lookin' at him and listenin'..." Instead of auditioning their material for Laibly, the musicians would simply begin recording it: if Laibly decided to reject the piece in question, he would tell the performer to stop playing after a verse or two went by. In such an event he would not explain the basis of his rejection, but would request another piece. "He always liked Charlie's records," House recalls. Once a song had been recorded Laibly would play back a brief excerpt of it over a loudspeaker: "...He wanted to know how it sound to us..."

Laiby's preoccupation with Blind Lemon Jefferson is evident from his attempt to solicit a version of Jefferson's last hit of consequence, *See That My Grave Is Kept Clean* (1927). House recalls:

...See, they made a lotta money outta that piece. Me and Charlie and Louise say: 'Don't know whether I can do it...'

...Willie and Charlie, couldn't none of them do it! They tried, but they couldn't, 'cause of that *beat* that Lemon had...I didn't go to bed until finally at a while I hit it...This gal Louise, she say: 'Oh, you got it, you got it!

...So when we went down to the (recording) laboratory at nine o'clock...I hit it, I say: 'Mister Laibly! See how this sound to you...'

...I put one verse on it...He say: 'Stop it, stop it!'

I say: 'What's the matter; what's wrong?'

He say: 'That's it, that's *it*!'

Laibly's enthusiasm was either exaggerated or short-lived, for House's rendition, *Missisippi County Farm*, would not be issued for a year, when it sold in such meager quantities that no copies of it are extant. In any event, Jefferson's

song was too dated to have any commercial value in the form of a "cover", let alone one with provincial lyrics.

In "covering" the blues rage of the moment, *Sittin' On Top Of The World,* Patton took the same commercially fatal course of dabbing a familiar hit with obscure local color. His uptempo nine and a half bar bottleneck version, *Some Summer Day,* apparently drawn from a real episode, assured a female acquaintance that her boyfriend or husband would return from prison:

Just let us pray
Oh some old day
When he left here
He's goin' to stay
Now Henry's gone; Johnnie don't you worry
He stealin' some summer day.

...Some got a month
Some got a year
Tell me Harry got
Lifetime here

While Patton's shouted five note vocal duplicated the melody of *Sittin' On Top Of The World,* his version featured two unusual instrumental breaks (of five and five and a half bars) that embellished it. Brown's more acoustically prominent guitar featured bass strumming played in the pattern Patton had previously used behind Henry Sims on *Runnin Wild,* which was likewise phrased in single measures and had the same accenting pattern (stressing the second beat of each bar).

Laibly's opinions as to the relative value of their work would be reflected by the records he chose to issue between the summer and fall of 1930. No less than six of the thirteen such records he placed on the market were Charlie Patton pieces, the first five of which had accrued from Patton's previous sessions.

In the course of a year as a Paramount mainstay Charlie Patton had been recorded more intensively than any blues singer before him. He had produced at least 42 sides, enough music to fill over three modern long-play albums. He had used the recording studio more creatively than any blues singer of his time, rearranging his own material, recording songs of passing fancy, preaching, playing the role of show-off spectator, and drafting his own studio musicians. Acting as his own producer, he had made Laibly largely superfluous.

In the process of leaving his unique musical self-portrait, Patton had produced only three hits of consequence, *Pony Blues, Down The Dirt Road Blues,*

and *High Water Everywhere*. As his own audience favored him for four songs, there is little reason to think that Patton would have long remained king of Paramount's roost had the Depression not interrupted his recording career.

After their return from Grafton, Patton, Brown, Louise Johnson, and House all held court in a barrelhouse on the *Kirby* plantation. Its absentee owner, a woman named Lonnie Armstrong, lived in Memphis. "She wouldn't hardly tell Charlie 'Good mornin',' House says of her, "...she just wanted that clown to draw people for her to make money."

The musicians' post-session association was brief. House saw Louise Johnson only once after 1930, and thought she drifted to Helena, Arkansas. For a time in the 1930s she lived on the *King and Anderson* plantation near Clarksdale. "...She was playin' long back in the Thirties at a little old place they call Rich," said Leroy Willis, who recalled that she commuted between Rich and Lula to play with his girlfriend, "Piano-Playin' Willie."

Enamored of Willie Brown, who groomed him as his vocalist and taught him guitar pieces, House soon moved from Lula to Lake Cormorant, becoming Brown's neighbor and best friend over the next decade. In House, Brown would find not only a lead singer and boon companion, but also a sycophant who would champion his deluded view of himself as a better musician than Charlie Patton.

Patton and Bertha Lee temporarily moved to Robinsonville in the wake of his session. "I don't know why he left Lula," House says. "...He took Bertha with him. The folks lost a cook when he left..." Patton, meanwhile, had gained his own local friend, a farmer named Richard Baker. "Thing about it, he wasn't so crazy about Richard," House reports, "it was Richard's old lady, but Richard didn't know it."

The local stay of Patton and Bertha was a brief one. "They didn't stay in there over two months," Elizabeth Moore said. "...Then he kinda went back and forth to make music."

Last Years

"We was increasin'; Charlie was decreasin'"
—Booker Miller

One of the localites who undoubtedly interested himself in Patton's Robinsonville performances was the 18-year old Robert Johnson, who was destined to succeed Patton as the Delta's most influential bluesman. Johnson's boogie arrangements would grip Delta blues in the years following Patton's death: "Boy, it spread all over the Delta," Booker Miller recalled. "Most everywhere you heard it." He began his career in the late 1920s with a repertoire of standards like *Pallet On The Floor*[1] and was to learn music from Son House and Willie Brown before becoming a traveling blues act. In 1931 or 1932 Johnson was situated in Hattiesburg; on Friday nights he would hobo to Jackson and play there before moving on to Saturday night engagements in the Delta town of Sunflower. During his stopovers in Jackson he taught his boogie style to Johnnie Temple, who knew him as "R. L.".

Although Willie Moore heard the youthful Johnson disparage Patton in Robinsonville ("He said Charlie Patton stomped both his feet and keeped up too much-a noise for him"), he came across to Temple as a Patton imitator, both vocally and instrumentally. When Johnnie Shines met Johnson in Arkansas in the same period, *Pony Blues* and *Banty Rooster* were basic to his repertoire. Shines recalled that he frequently spoke of Patton as an inspiration.

Eventually he outgrew his identity as a Patton imitator to the extent of not recording any Patton material. Yet the records he produced in 1936 and 1937 showed that he had given Patton's music more than passing scrutiny. The bottleneck bass riff that set off verses of *Come On In My Kitchen* mimicked the bass riff of *Pea Vine Blues*, and the bottleneck damping Johnson used on works like *Travelin' Riverside Blues* was reminiscent of similar damping Patton performed in *Banty Rooster*. The sixth beat bass slides Patton featured in *Maggie* were echoed in Johnson's *Terraplane Blues* and *Stones In My Passway*. Moreover, the repeating one measure bass figure of *Maggie* laid the groundwork for the boogie phrases Johnson would play in *When You Got A Good Friend*, *Sweet Home Chicago*, and *I Believe I'll Dust My Broom*. While Johnson employed two bass figures in a V-I harmonic sequence as opposed to Patton's single descending

line, he followed Patton's method of arranging the phrase within a vocal line, launching it on the second beat so that the third measure would coincide with his last vocal beat.

Johnson began his career in an age of small returns for bluesmen. "Most musicianers then, talkin' about back in 1931 or 1932," Booker Miller said, "if you was gettin' four or five dollars for playin', you was gettin' good pay. Wasn't much money out." Such were the discouraging conditions that faced Patton in the twilight of his own career. Even when he had no rivals for popularity as a Delta attraction, his records became increasingly difficult to come by, and it is doubtful that he even heard most of the products of his second and third sessions.

High Water Everywhere would prove to be Patton's last appreciable commercial success. *Rattlesnake Blues,* issued in May of 1930 (around the time Patton was embarking on his third session) seems to have had respectable sales for the period. Some ten copies of the record are extant, as many as exist of *Pea Vine Blues,* issued three months previously. However, from that point onwards Patton's record sales became negligible. Between July and the end of 1930, Paramount issued seven Patton records, apparently following a fixed monthly release schedule. With the exception of the fourth release, *Jesus Is A Dyin' Bed Maker,* which appeared in October (and remains in the form of six or seven copies), and its fifth release, *Moon Going Down,* these items sold so poorly that no more than three copies remain of any of them.

Thanks to the Depression, Mississippians could no longer afford seventy five cent records. Other forces were also working to grind Patton's sales to a halt. Shortly after *High Water* appeared, Paramount (in the apparent interests of cost-cutting) ceased advertising in the *Chicago Defender,* and Patton's ensuing records received no publicity of any kind. In the same period, the company was dealt a devastating blow when its largest distributor, the Artophone Corporation, decided to drop out of the record business. Its defection left Paramount with no access to Mississippi dealers. While dealers could order Paramounts directly from the company (as did H. C. Speir) it is doubtful that many did so. For retailers were already shunning the label, according to Speir: "...Dealers cut 'em off. Quit handlin' their records." It was the poor sound quality of the Paramount (which contained substandard pressing compounds) that alienated dealers, Speir said. Paradoxically, Paramount had begun its "race" program partly because its inferior sound quality had alienated the dealers who trafficked in the pop records the label originally produced.

By the end of 1930, Paramount had begun to curtail its record production in the face of a shrunken market. Apparently it did so by fifty percent. Whereas the company had placed a standard label order of 3000 items for each release in the 1920s, it ordered 750 labels for Patton's *Circle Round The Moon* (issued

in late 1930 or early 1931), and the same total for another title that was given the same release number. This figure appears to have represented the sales figure a contemporary release was expected to attain. As a consequence, its three-man pressing department was reduced to part-time employment: "We worked about three days a week, five hours a day," said one of the pressers, Alfred Schultz.

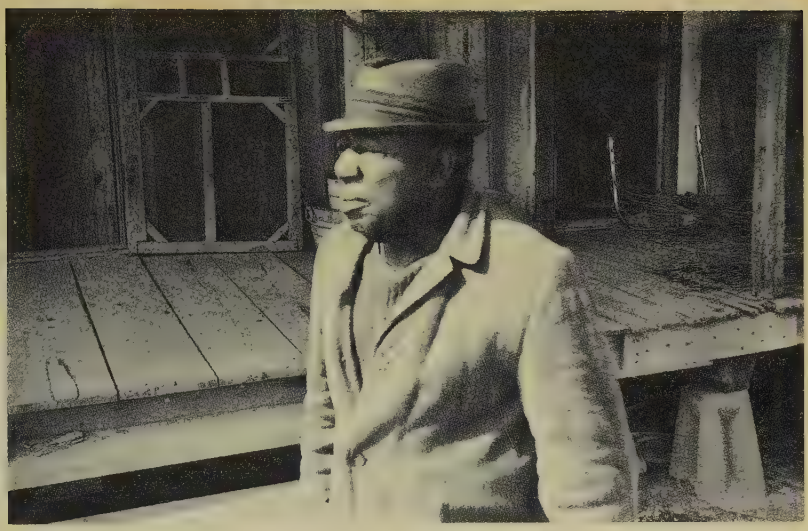
Around this time, Patton's importance in the company's portfolio began to wane, no doubt because of Paramount's loss of Mississippi distribution. Seven of the company's one hundred-odd offerings between the summer and close of 1930 had been Patton records. After issuing *Circle Round The Moon* (of which two copies remain), Paramount put out twenty-nine "race" records before venturing another Patton release, *Bird Nest Bound*, in the spring of 1931. This item, along with *Some Summer Day* (issued soon afterwards), marked the end of Patton as a 1931 record commodity.

In the spring or summer of 1931, Arthur Laibly was fired by the company's chief executive, Otto Moeser. Though Laibly later portrayed himself as a casualty of industry "conditions"[2], it was probably his inability to obtain a new distributor to replace Artophone that resulted in his dismissal. Alone among contemporary recording directors who did appreciable "race" recording, Laibly would never have another job in the record business. After an interlude as a salesman of busts of George Washington, he became an insurance agent for Boars and Wausau.

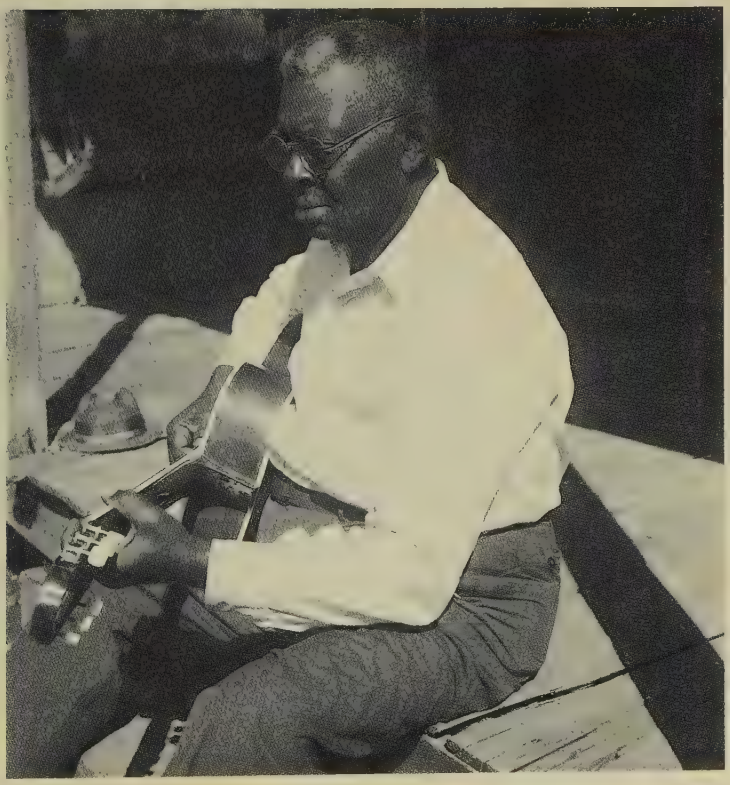
With Laibly's departure the operation of the label (under the direction of Henry Stephany, a chair company draftsman and engineer) became largely perfunctory. Early in 1932 the company belatedly issued its final Patton items, *Frankie And Albert* (backed with *Some Of These Days*) and *Joe Kirby* (backed with Part Two of *Jim Lee*), songs recorded nearly two years earlier. Of these issues (the twentieth and twenty-first Patton records) only single copies remain. At this point only a single live recording session and some twenty more releases were in store for the company.

According to Otto Moeser, the label was still breaking even when he decided to abandon the record business in mid-1932. Though Paramount's miniscule production costs enabled the firm to escape losses, its owners were not interested in merely staying afloat. They wanted sizeable profits.

The dismantling of Paramount entailed the swift destruction of much blues history. The company executives sold the nickel masters from which they produced records as scrap metal, and disposed of their remaining stock. The Grafton recording studio and production plant were simply abandoned, along with the company's recording machine, which eventually crashed through the rotting floorboards of the studio and tumbled to the cellar.



Willie Moore



Hayes McMullen

Gennett and Sons (side view)

Gennett and Sons (front view)

Henry Sims

Chicago Defender newspaper advertisements.

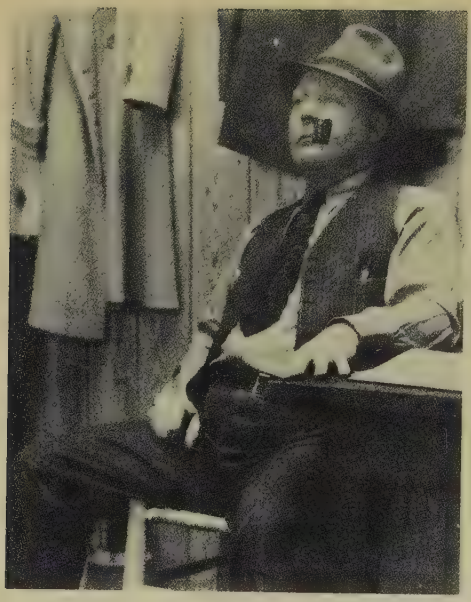
Mississippi Flood

Chicago Defender newspaper advertisements.

Flood refugees at Vicksburg, Mississippi

On the Levee, Memphis, Tenn.

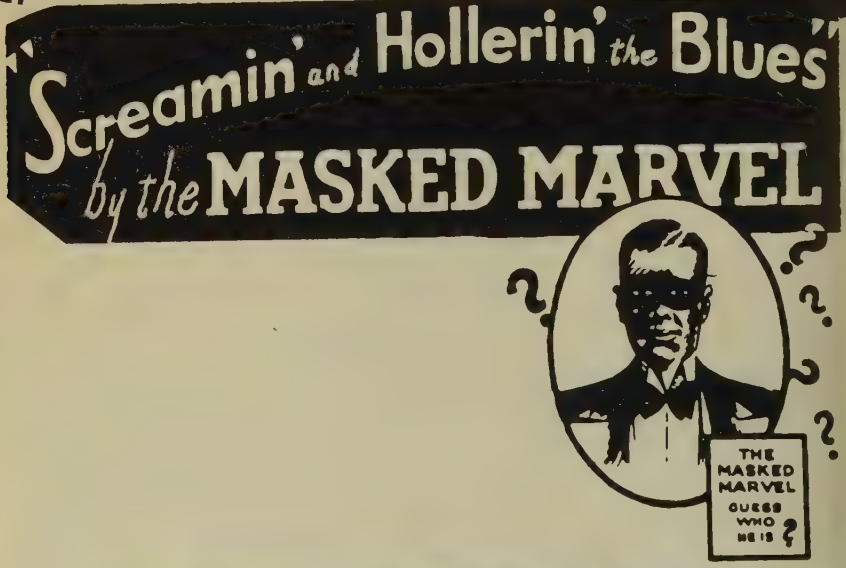
Wisconsin Chair Co.



W.R. Calaway

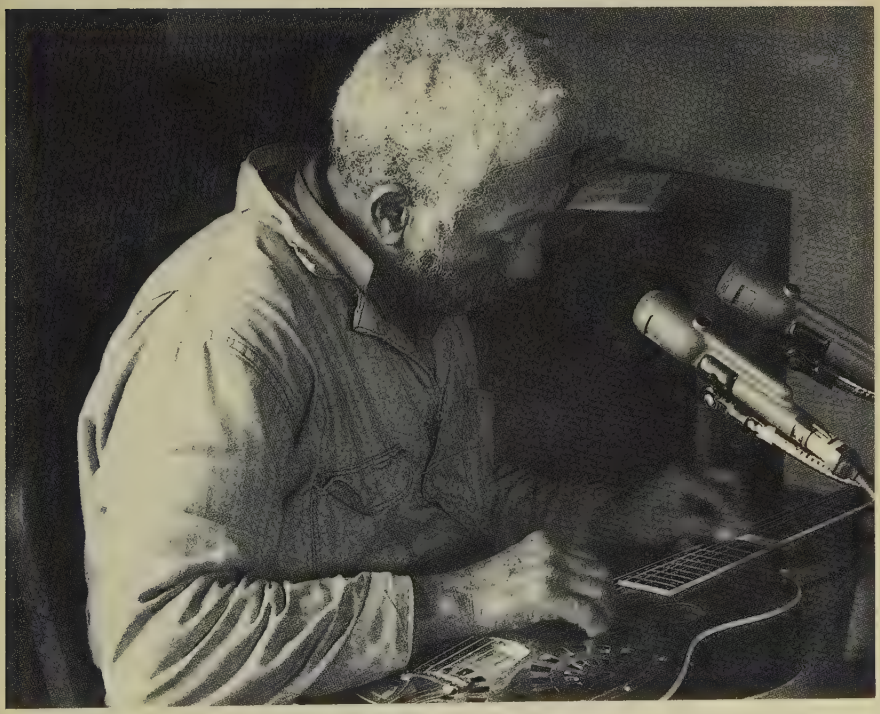
Art Laibly

Chatmon family.

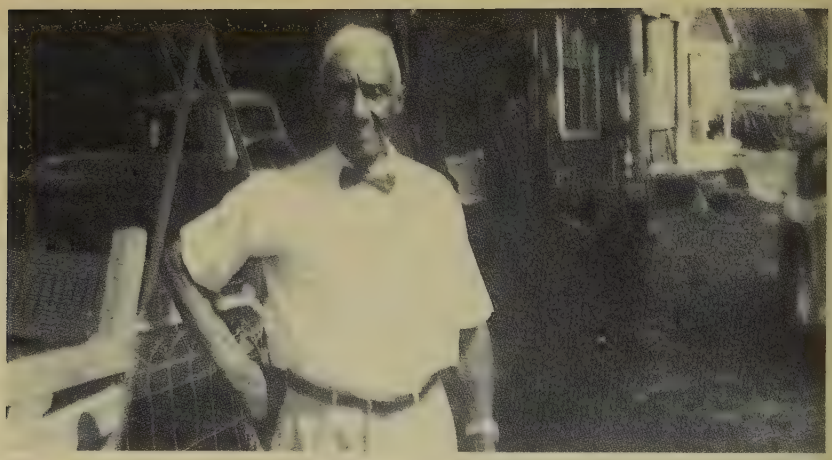


Chicago Defender newspaper advertisements.

Bertha Lee



Eugene Powell, Greenville, Mississippi.



Percy Thomas

Johnnie Mack and wife.

The chief executives of the Wisconsin Chair Company had already lost enthusiasm for their recording sideline when Patton paid his final visit to Grafton in the spring of 1930. On that occasion a Paramount official (probably Otto Moeser) tried to unload the company on H. C. Speir, who may well have been its leading retailer of the period. "They were gonna liquidate," Speir recalled. The official explanation for this decision was that Paramount's northern location made it too expensive to record Southern musical talent.

Speir's attempts to purchase Paramount were forestalled by his failure to obtain backing from Jackson's Chamber of Commerce. "I couldn't get no one down here to even help me move the company," he said. Had Speir taken over the company the Depression fortunes of Charlie Patton and numerous other Mississippi bluesmen would have been appreciably altered.

Considering Speir's capabilities and his wide range of musical interests, it is no less unfortunate that his talents were never put to use by the Library of Congress, the first non-commercial organization to attempt to document black Southern music. Its initial field recordings (undertaken on behalf of its tiny Archive of American Folk Song) were conducted by the obtuse and unimaginative John Lomax, a sixty-one year old Mississippi-born folklorist whose *idee fixe* was to document the survival of the "field holler" and work song. In August of 1933 he spent four days on the premises of Parchman Farm, where he recorded forty-odd *a cappella* prison songs. Had Lomax been more of a musicologist and less of an ideologue he might have produced an invaluable documentary of Charlie Patton, whose recollections alone would have surpassed these prison recordings from the standpoint of musical significance.

Yet another folklorist of sorts who scoured the Delta for material during the Depression was the New Orleans newspaperman Roark Bradford (1896-1949). Already a popular dialect writer (his *Ol' Man Adam An' His Chillun* of 1928 had inspired the Broadway hit *Green Pastures*), Bradford became a friend of Joe Rice Dockery and sometimes paid his respects to *Dockery's* plantation, where he was in the habit of culling material from the resident cook. Later in the decade he would also make the rounds of Parchman Farm (under Joe Dockery's auspices), picking up prisoner lore. Bradford's earlier Delta diggings were apparent in his dialect fable *John Henry* (1931), a national Literary Guild selection at the time of Patton's death that became a Broadway musical in 1940.

Bradford depicted the legendary John Henry as a plantation and levee roustabout and used him to personify his race. The symbolic John Henry makes a notable contrast with Charlie Patton, who was the Delta's only flesh and blood legend of the age. Bradford's John Henry is impulsive, footloose, readily provoked to immense rage, and generous with his fists (towards either sex); the captive of child-like emotion, he lives on an episodic plane of random adventure.

He is the black laborer as seen by the paternal planter, a simpleton consumed by his own appetites.

One wonders how Bradford would have appraised Patton, who likewise made professional calls at Parchman, though (a black policeman from Indianola recalled) characteristically on the Fourth of July, when convicts received cash presents from their relatives and had money to spend on entertainment.

It was the real-life equivalents of John Henry who were Patton's mortal enemies on the dangerous plantation house "frolic" circuit he was obliged to pursue in the early 1930s as bona fide barrelhouses became largely a thing of the past. "...A lotta mens didn't like him at the time 'cause...a lotta womens fool over him," David Edwards says. Even if Patton did nothing to foster their interest, it boded trouble for him. Skip James noted that at "frolics": "...Some old 'clowny' woman...come up to you...she get a drink or two in her head; she just wanna show herself. She had never seed you before sometimes...but she wanna make people think you done fell for her. Quite naturally their boyfriends or their husbands wouldn't like that...Boyfriend or husband or somethin' say: 'Get rid of that nigger; kill him.'"

Willie Morris said of Delta males: "Shit man, them guys down there, if they see you around their woman and they caught up with you, they'd kill you. They'd go out there and get them cottonfield women, you know: if one quit 'em they couldn't get another one—they'd kill you."

Men who resented Patton's forwardness with their women (or vice-versa) had little to fear from the law, so long as they labored steadily on plantations. "They could kill you down there," Sam Chatmon noted, "and they say: 'That nigger he killed wasn't no 'count. Turn him loose. That's a good worker.' They'd turn him loose."

David Edwards echoed this view: "You wouldn't go nowhere if you killed somebody and was a good worker: you'd just go back and work some more..." Son House agreed: "Wasn't no law botherin' you. Not if you'se a good worker. If you'se a good worker for Mister so-and-so, that settled it."

Patton had always walked a dangerous tightrope as the "high sport" of Ernest Brown's recollection, but over the last years of his career he seemed to lose his footing, to the extent of nearly losing his life. At a house "frolic" around 1930 in Moorhead or Itta Bena, Willie Morris saw a man attack Patton when his wife became indiscreet in her glances at the musician. A man named Snuff Gibson must have made an attempt on Patton's life at a Sunflower "frolic", for a town resident heard that Gibson shot Patton to death there in 1930.

In 1933 Patton almost lost his life at a Holly Ridge house "frolic", winding up with a slit throat that damaged his vocal cords and impaired his singing ability. "One of those old guys cut him," David Edwards recalls. "It was a deep

cut in his vein...a bad cut." Edwards had arrived at the same "frolic" in hopes of accompanying Patton, only to learn that he had just been removed to the King Dawson Hospital in Greenville, twenty miles west of Holly Ridge.

In relating a fabled account of Patton's murder, Willie Young was likely imparting the true details of Patton's maiming. As Young heard the story, Patton was killed on the *Hollyknoe* plantation, a few miles southwest of Holly Ridge. "...This woman went got up on Charlie's lap (during a performance), but Charlie, he didn't make the woman get on his lap. She wanna come kinda easily. And the guy (i.e., her husband or consort) was a jealous guy, you understand...the guy come in and found her in his lap. Just let out on him with a knife."

Afterwards Patton wore the legacy of his brush with death in the form of a long, jagged scar across his throat. It did nothing to temper his happy-go-lucky exterior: "...Wasn't either of us thinkin' about death," Booker Miller recounted. "We was here to stay, we reckoned." In all likelihood he viewed such assaults as an occupational hazard: "If you get to be a good musician, you'se accused of all the women," Miller said. "...They gonna chase you, but they turn around and say you chasin' them. That's the way that go."

Such was, at least the occupational alibi of the professional blues singer. Though Miller and Edwards both attributed Patton's flirtatiousness to his drinking, his contempt for plantation males who resented his "meddling" was archly advertised on *Stone Pony Blues*:

> Well I didn't come here to steal nobody's brown
> I just stopped by here well to keep you from stealin'
> mine.

By Patton's lights, married men were stealing his possessions. In *Circle Round The Moon* he ventured a similarly jaded joke about imprisonment:

> Out on the road servin' out my time
> An' the Delta women were tryin'-a run me down.
>
> How long, great God how long?
> Shall I be here rollin' when your man is gone?

Such was the hardship of prison life, as conceived by Patton: it deprived him of opportunities to occupy the beds vacated by working men.

In view of Patton's openly acquisitive attitude towards married women, it is a sad commentary on his society that his common-law wife became the popular scapegoat for his throat injury. A number of Delta males would repeat

a fable that Bertha Lee cut his throat with a butcher knife in Cleveland, either killing him or nearly killing him in the process. In truth she was Patton's provider: "She took *good* care of him," Miller said of their relationship, which found her pulling a plough instead of cooking on his behalf during the Depression. As Patton cavorted freely about the countryside, David Edwards reports, "his wife stayed there and worked all the time" at their plantation residences.

She came to resent Patton's loose life-style, as Son House was to learn when he was to visit them in late 1933. When the two musicians returned from an all-night house "frolic", Patton's entrance into his bedroom triggered a fight that caused him to beckon House. House found Patton pinned to the floor; as Bertha flailed at him with her fists, he implored his guest: "Pull her offa me 'fore she gets hurt." Though the incongruity of Patton's threat caused House to laugh, Bertha cut a pathetic figure as a love-struck creature of convenience. When she was to record with Patton she used *Mind Reader Blues* as a song of recrimination, presenting herself as the one steadfast companion he would need after everyone else shunned him as a scoundrel:

> Baby I can see, just what's on your mind
> You got a long black woman with her gold teeth in her face.
>
> I take a long look right smack down in your mind
> And what I see on your mind you would not have no friends.
>
> I take a long look right smack down in your mind
> An' I see poor papa come a-hobblin' down the line.
>
> Aw don't kid your mama you ain't foolin' nobody but yourself
> An' what I see on your mind you would not have no friends.
>
> ...I caught the riverside, my man got the transfer boat
> An' the next time I seen him he had a girl way up the road.

The last couplet suggests that Patton might have abandoned her in Lula, and the song itself may have beeen occasioned by such an episode. His apathetic rejoinder was recorded in *Poor Me*:

Don't the moon look pretty?
Shinin' down through the tree
I can see Bertha Lee, but she can't see me
You may go; you may stay
But she'll come back, some sweet day
By an' by sweet mama, baby won't you by an' by?

However she clung to Patton, their affair, Son House snorted, "didn't amount to nothin'," and Patton disrupted it as he found fit. In 1932 or 1933 he formally married the daughter of a black plantation overseer on a farm near Morgan City, a tiny town in southern LeFlore County that numbered only 150 residents. These festivities were attended by a Sartartia emigre and admirer of Patton's named Henry Stuckey (1897-1966), who had (a dozen years earlier) taught Skip James the fundamentals of guitar-playing. Stuckey did not know of Patton's attachment to Bertha Lee, who was then living with him on a plantation twenty miles northeast of Morgan City. The isolation of Morgan City (which was not serviced by the "Dog") would have made it an easy matter for Patton to deceive both parties, but the apparent brevity of his Morgan City attachment indicates that one of them may have learned of Patton's juggling act and put an end to it.[3]

Whatever his tangential romances, Patton was to remain Bertha Lee's errant living companion. During the nearly four years that remained of his life after leaving Robinsonville in the summer of 1930 they lived in three adjacent plantation communities between Leland and Indianola: Longswitch, Holly Ridge, and Heathman (also called "Heathman-Dedham" for the plantation that gave the town its identity). Perhaps because Holly Ridge was the most familiar of the three communities (none of which could boast of having 100 residents in 1930), Patton was generally considered one of its residents by associates who did not live in the area. "I don't know why he didn't record it," Booker Miller said, "but he sung a very beautiful song about Holly Ridge."

Patton seems to have spent most of the 1930s on the Heathman-Dedham plantation.[4] The plantation could readily be construed as part of Holly Ridge, which lay about two miles west of it. At the time of his birth it had ranked as one of Sunflower County's eight existing communities, serving as a way station on the Georgia Pacific line and rating its own postal and express office. When Patton arrived there Heathman was (like Longswitch and Holly Ridge) a mere flagstop on the Southern, which was locally named the "Doodlebug line" and was to be the subject of his own *Southern Whistle Blues*. "That little thing had about two coaches on it," David Edwards said of the single train that serviced the area. "Had a stripe in front, look like a doodlebug."

Patton's arrival at Heathman-Dedham might have been prompted by the local presence of his uncle Sherman Martin, who was to live with him and Bertha Lee on the plantation and chauffeur him to house "frolics" in an automobile, as he had done at the outset of Patton's career over two decades earlier. His disposition to remain in the area may have resulted from deteriorating health. "His wife said that when he came to Holly Ridge and settled down, she say she figured then that he was nearin' the end," Booker Miller remembered. Ishmon Bracey, who often saw Patton in Indianola (four miles east of Heathman) during the Depression, would remark on his slow physical decline: "They say he had been all and around sickly a good little while before he died," Bracey told John Fahey. "...Some say he had somethin' like the double pneumonia...He did used to have kidney trouble."

One circumstance that definitely impeded Patton's professional mobility was the Depression erosion of the Mississippi railway. In 1932 or 1933 the "Dog" abolished passenger service on all but its Moorhead branch (which ran from Belzoni to Clarksdale). Patton's dour view of this event was to be conveyed in *Thirty Four Blues:*

> Fella down the country, it almost make you cry
> "My God, chillun"
> Women and children, flaggin' freight trains for rides.

As for himself, Patton was left largely at the mercy of other forms of transportation: "Most of the times he'd get in a car and go (to a dance) or catch a Greyhound bus," Booker Miller reported.

The "Dog" had been the life-blood of the Delta barrelhouse, and with it, the nomadic blues career. The decline of the "Dog" and the relative infrequency of buses made the bona fide barrelhouse which attracted patrons from outlying towns all but impossible to operate. Given this situation, Patton had no professional incentive to travel widely in the early 1930s, for it is doubtful that house "frolic" rates varied to any appreciable extent across the Delta.

Perhaps to compensate for his decline in stamina, Patton primed Bertha Lee as a singer and appeared with her at such Holly Ridge hotspots as the plantation "frolics" staged by Lonnie Hodges (who considered Patton unbalanced after seeing him smash a guitar during a temper tantrum at one such performance) and a general store, the white owner of which (John Allen) sometimes added his fiddle to their duets. Bertha's modest solo repertoire included a *Bo Weavil Blues* (apparently a copy of the 1924 Ma Rainey hit) and a rendition of Memphis Minnie's *Bumble Bee* (retitled *Yellow Bee*) that was her best-known

song. "She could sing pretty good at that time," David Edwards opines. "...I thought she was a good songster," Booker Miller agreed. "Didn't look to me, though, she could sing like Charlie could: I'd rather hear Charlie than hear her anytime." According to Son House, Patton thought little of her vocal abilities: "Charlie, he didn't think Bertha could sing good enough; no, he didn't think that." On recording she would emerge as a competent but uninteresting contralto who relied heavily on vibrato and made no attempt to alter her delivery within a song.

When other males proved appreciative of her performing, Patton readily became indignant. "He was jealous of her," reported Johnnie Mack, who witnessed some of their appearances. "He sure was. He'd have a fit sometime: he get mad, and get up, and walk out (of the "frolic")."

Another local duet partner of the period was Kid Bailey. Robert Gildart, who hired Patton to play for his "frolics" on Will Thompson's plantation near Longswitch in the early 1930s, recalled that Bailey "come out to Holly Ridge and lived for a while...him and Patton was out there together; they played on a 'jukehouse' on the side of the road goin' towards Indianola...He'd play 'second' sometimes, and then again he'd play lead and Charlie Patton would 'second' him." Bailey (whose first name, Gildart thought, was John) soon set his eye on greener pastures: "He'd mention all the time that he was gonna leave here, and make some money." He was for the most part based in Leland, nearly ten miles southwest of Holly Ridge. "...After Charlie Patton died, Bailey he left there," Gildart reported. "Bailey left (Leland) and went out there around Morgan City some place."

In Longswitch, where Patton lived on the *Hancock* plantation between 1931 and 1932, several Depression drifters vied for grubstakes, including Bo Weavil Jackson, the accordian player Walter Rhodes, and a Leland bluesman named Tom Toy who was noted for *Catfish Blues*. An immodest local resident named Johnnie Mack (born 1896) who played guitar and mandolin and was taken with Blind Blake's records considered himself the most capable musician in Longswitch, where he had begun playing in 1924. Mack and his duet partner Lewis Nichols (a mandolinist and guitarist from Greenville) were not inclined to yield their turf to a boisterous upstart who (Mack said) "played so funny till I couldn't hardly catch on to it: have a bottleneck and all that kinda mess, and hollerin', and whoopin.'" While neither Mack nor Nichols sang, their retinue of pop and ragtime standards like *Five Foot Two* and *Darktown Strutter's Ball* made them in demand among white planters, whose patronage (to the tune of seven or eight dollars per performance) and indifference to Patton's music (which Mack dismissed as "junk") created friction with Patton. Or so Mack would later claim, while demonstrating that he and Nichols went out of their way to an-

tagonize Patton by attempting to upstage him when he took an intermission break at a black "frolic" in Longswitch.

"...Me and Lewis was just standin' outside," Mack related, "and Lewis say: 'Let's 'run' that guy away from here!' And sure enough, that house *rocked.* He quit, boy...He sit down there a while and a woman come in: 'Oh Charlie, *play!*' "...'I ain't gonna play here...' And 'fore we knew one more thing, he's *gone*!" But this supposed humiliation of Charlie Patton sounded suspiciously like the imagined glorification of Johnnie Mack, who did not play black dance music. As a hired musician, Patton would not have been at liberty to walk out during a performance without forfeiting his salary.

In this period Patton was more apt to fall prey to his advancing alcoholism than to musical muggers like Mack and Nichols, as Robert Gildart discovered when the artist accepted his offer of five dollars, free food and free drinks to serenade his Longswitch "frolics". "Charlie Patton would drink as long as you give it to him till he get so drunk he couldn't walk," Gildart recalled sourly. Miller said that he was accustomed to cradling a crock of moonshine at his feet as he performed. He exalted gin as a sexual superlative in a spoken aside when he recorded *Hang It On The Wall* in 1934:

> "Aw sho', baby! It's gettin' good as gin"
> Aw, I can catch it when
> I'm back in town again
> My jelly, my roll...

A Depression-vintage work called *Whiskey Distillery* advertised the imagined consequences of his drinking. "He often sang it," Booker Miller recalled. "'Some love they gin, but give me my *Rockin' Rye*; If I don't quit drinkin' my moonshine whiskey, Lord I soon will die.'" Among Patton's cronies alcohol was considered particularly deadly to persons with social diseases, and his philandering should have given him cause for imaginary alarm when he drank to excess. "...Much whiskey as he drank, man: if he had syphilis or gonorrhea or anything like that man, he'd have been dead before he was," Booker Miller said, "'cause he drink that stuff every day." Patton's immodest drinking and immodesty with attached females would invite still other lurid death scenarios for himself. "I really believe someone gave Charlie Patton a dose of poison whiskey," Willie Morris said, echoing what was to become a common Delta supposition in the wake of his death.

Patton's longevity as a performer posed an even greater threat to his popularity than his excessive drinking. By the early 1930s the novelty of his most popular pieces had long since faded, and less capable musicians were

more attractive to some employers because their sounds were less familiar. For example, his five dollar a night franchise at a "frolic" held between Bellewood and Tribbet (a town five miles south of Longswitch) was usurped by a weak-voiced guitarist twenty years his junior who numbered among his admirers, Eugene Powell of Hollandale. "Charlie had played there so much till his music had done got common, that's all," Powell recalled. "They done hear-ed it, know how it sound and everything: mine's all new to 'em. So I got his place. I didn't try to 'roll' him (i.e., steal his job): they just said they'd rather have me..."

The familiarity of Patton's sound, in fact, made it a musical leper for the clever or ambitious Delta bluesman of the decade, and no doubt explains why Robert Johnson was to skirt it on his own recordings. As Powell explains: "That's how come I never did learn none of Charlie Patton's pickin'. Because I played out in there where he played, and I wanted somethin' different." Patton himself had surely appraised the most popular neighborhood musicians of his youth from the same standpoint, and the musicians who came to copy him were most likely to be beginners with no repertoire of their own.

Among the poor men's Pattons who parasitically traded on his musical identity was Howlin' Wolf, who would become one of the last commercially successful blues singers in the 1950s. He had moved to Ruleville as a thirteen year old in 1923 and had received some pointers from Patton as a beginner five years later. Between 1930 and 1931 Wolf lived in Roundpound, Arkansas and earned $1.50 a night as a guitarist whose stock in trade was *Pony Blues* and *Banty Rooster.* "Wolf played a whole lotta Patton's pieces," said Johnnie Shines. By 1932 Wolf was exporting his wares to the Mississippi Delta. "He came through Greenwood about in 1932," Booker Miller said. "And man, he was *terrible*!"

Another pseudo-Patton whose imitations bordered on impersonation was a wino named Toomer Wilson, who lived on Wood's plantation near Hollandale and in Estill, a town twenty miles southeast of Holly Ridge. Wilson not only mimicked Patton's foot-stomping, guitar-slapping and vocal asides, but even copied the cater-cornered sitting position Patton customarily took as he played. "...Every time I'd see him play I'd think about Charlie Patton," Sam Chatmon recalled. "...His singin' and pickin' was just like Charlie Patton...He'd bring his voice out—*'Aaagh*! — just the same way Charlie Patton did."[5] One guesses that Wilson's efforts to pass himself off as a Patton replica (no matter how amateurish) made him highly employable in his native Washington County, for Patton's own appearances there in the 1930s were infrequent.

Patton's flock of would-be imitators were essentially nonentities who could only have made him sound good by comparison. "I could name you two or three who *tried* to play like him," said Booker Miller. "This boy they called

Elijah Jones, he tried it: he failed...Never could get it down...We had another boy down here, he didn't last too long, we call him T. L. Little, and another one down there called Joe Donnelly." All three players were from Swiftown, about eight miles southeast of Morgan City. The best of Patton's assorted imitators, Miller believed, was an Itta Bena bluesman dubbed (after the children's game) "Bo Diddley", who died in the late 1930s. "Now he was a pretty good musicianer," Miller opined. "...He got cut to death in Tutwiler...A woman cut him to death."

Patton's grip on Mississippi blues of the era is strikingly demonstrated in the early records of Big Joe Williams, a vagrant blues singer from Crawford (an eastern Mississippi town not far from Alabama) who met him in Hollandale in the late 1920s and later saw him in Holly Ridge. Williams not only made Pattonesque bass snapping a general feature of his six 1935 debut pieces, but seems to have borrowed Patton's proclivity for high-pitched bottleneck slides by capoing his guitar as high as the tenth fret, producing eerie tones that lay within the register of a violin. Unlike Patton, Williams worked within a narrow groove, never departing from one chord works in "Spanish" tuning or acquiring the subtlety Patton was able to exhibit. His Greenwood-based protege David Edwards became Patton's occasional Holly Ridge associate in the early 1930s. "It's a thousand musicians down there," Edwards was to say of Mississippi. "Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton was the best." Edwards (who was Booker Miller's favorite guitarist besides Patton) would play fleeting Patton quotations in *Watercourse Blues* (played with G shapes), a 1942 Library of Congress work that virtually summarized what Delta musicianship of the decade had to offer. It is regrettable that he did not record his contemporary interpretations of *Pony Blues* or *Jersey Bull*, which he would belatedly record in rust-coated versions as a blues rediscovery.

A faint tinge of Patton's music was also evident in the signature song of Booker White, another native of eastern Mississippi whose aquaintance with Patton was limited to recordings. White's *Aberdeen Mississippi Blues* (1940), used an off-beat device Patton had pioneered in *Pony Blues*: in singing the second vocal phrase of its stanzas he introduced a melodic and rhythmic variation, heavily emphasizing every other beat during the first six beats of the line. The same device was employed by an amateurish-sounding native of Columbus named Otto Virgial, who used it during the extended (seven and a half bar) initial phrase of a two chord dance piece, *Little Girl In Rome* (1935).

None of Patton's partners and imitators of the period was basically involved in his career, save for a short, light-complexioned farmer who lived on the *Bear Ridge* plantation between Swiftown and Pugh City and was nicknamed "Mister Pink". He was Booker Miller, who became Patton's regular sidekick, closest

protege, and most ardent admirer. Nearly four decades after Patton provided him with musical assistance, Miller provided posterity with its most vivid view of Patton, bringing a remote blues great into focus as a person. His reminiscences of Patton threw the latter into unexpected light: himself a wholesome, industrious man, Miller did not recognize the unsavory Patton who loomed in the imagination of musicians like Son House and Hayes McMullen. He was fascinated by Patton, whom he respected and revered as a father figure.

"I was a loner till I met Charlie," Miller recalled before his death in 1969. "...If I hadn't never met him I don't think I would have taken it up, the guitar, you know...I mighta learned to play maybe one record or one song, to suit my fancy. But he told me: 'Say, man!...You oughta go head-on out there and just—just *pick*!'"

Between 1930 and 1934 Miller was so often picking behind Patton that he could declare: "If we wasn't playin' together, he was playin' by himself." Their pairings were typically arranged by Patton: "He'd write me, tell me where he was gonna be, he say: 'Kid, I want you to be there.' If he sent for me, brother I'se goin'..." He reported: "...The furthest point that I traveled away from home with Charlie was up here near Memphis; a place they call Tunica..." Whereas Miller would return home to work, Patton would continue towards Memphis, and possibly points beyond: Sleepy John Estes (who first heard Patton on Beale Street in 1930) recalled seeing him occasionally in Oakland, Tennessee during the Thirties.

In addition to Miller's musical services, Patton no doubt welcomed his .38 ("I carried one everywhere I went") as a buffer between himself and strangers. Even a modest journey between Itta Bena and Sunflower plunged him into a threatening wilderness. So much had Miller himself pointed out to Patton when the latter once raised his voice against a bootlegger named Hollins after tanking up in the latter's rural jukehouse in the early 1930s. "...One said he paid; one said he didn't pay," Miller said, recollecting the incident. "He didn't wanna settle for it; he didn't wanna pay twice. We (Miller and another friend) didn't know how many we'd have to fight; we didn't want him to get hurt. In them days you'd get to arguin' with one man and another man'd knock your brains out."

The argument was settled without bloodshed. "...He spoke one time, that same day. He said: "'You-all oughta let me 'had' (fight) him.' I told him: 'No, man!' I said: 'You don't know these fellas!'...He be fightin' one man: another man walk up there and knock him in the head. Well, I woulda had to shoot somebody to keep him from him (Patton)."

As Patton's assistant Miller not only received exposure to his favorite musician ("I loved to hear him play") but a chance to complete the course in guitar-playing he had begun at Patton's behest late in 1929, when the latter

had promised him: "If you listen to me, I learn you how to pick a guitar." At first Miller was so frustrated in his efforts to learn Patton's music that he turned to a Clarksdale musician named James Binell for pointers. "Now he was *good,*" Miller said of Binell, "but he wasn't as good as Charlie...That boy was good with a guitar, but he wasn't my ideal to worship. You know some people is 'sumptious with what they got, and you got to beg 'em, persuade 'em (to part with it), and that was the part about him I didn't like."

Though Patton "fussed" a lot as Miller's teacher, he was less discouraged by his pupil's early ineptitude than was Miller himself: "I used to tell him all the time, I said: 'My fingers is too big to get in there!'

"He say: 'They ain't no bigger than mine! *They* get in there.'"

Eventually Miller acquired confidence with much of Patton's basic repertoire, including *Pea Vine Blues* and *Banty Rooster*: "I got to the place where I thought, I reckon I'se as good as *he* was..." At the same time, he respected a basic distinction between their talents: "...He played a lot of songs I couldn't play. He lost me on 'em—I just couldn't produce 'em like he could. I'd learn 'em *after* he played 'em..."

Miller's discretion as a Patton imitator sheds an interesting light on protocol among professional blues singers. Assuming Patton's proprietory interest in the material that represented his livelihood, he did not perform versions of Patton pieces (acquired largely by watching Patton play) in front of his mentor. "...I played like him when he wasn't around, but I didn't try to imitate him when he's around: I just played *with* him."

By 1932 Miller had learned enough to tout himself to Itta Bena's Ralph Lembo as a recording prospect: "He told me that I could go over the top, just for a little practice." Taken to New Orleans with "Bo Diddley", Miller cut four test-pressings, probably for the Victor label. They included a song called *Katy At The Landing*, his rendition of Patton's *Maggie* (using Patton's unrecorded lyrics), and *Crow Jane* ("He'd help me sing it," Miller said of Patton, "but he never did take that for his own song.") Largely on Patton's advice, he refused Lembo's subsequent offer of a recording session for seventy-five dollars.

In auditioning for Lembo, Miller was leery of venturing his favorite Patton pieces, *Pony* and *Down The Dirt Road*: "He was too famous with 'em, and I didn't wanna try 'em."

Nor did Patton content himself with his own standards. When the Delta flooded in 1932, he floated a revised edition of *High Water*. "Man, we had some *water* here in 1932...he sung about it," Miller said. Miller's own invention ("It's water here an' it's water everywhere; I would go to Greenwood but the water's taken Baptist Town")[6] prompted Patton to praise him with the words: "Kid, you're finally learnin', ain't you?"

Of Patton's various Depression inventions only one piece appeared to take real hold with his audience. It was played on the order of *Maggie* and was called *Black Cow Blues*: "Oh Lord, I remember that one," Miller said. "Brother Lord; yes-yes! 'If you see my black cow, drive that heifer home; I ain't had no milk since my cow been gone.' Old Charlie could sing that, too!...Now you talkin' about a comedy act, now, he put one on with that, and people—oh man, they had him playin' it *every*where."

Towards the end of 1933 Patton decided to revive himself as a recording act, apparently on the grounds that he had amassed enough new material for an extended session. Instead of tapping Miller (who had no professional aspirations), he reverted to two associates he had scarcely seen since his 1930 session: Willie Brown and Son House.

In the 1930s House had become a part-time bluesman, much to Willie Brown's disgust: "He said if Son House couldn't make enough money playin' the guitar, he gonna pick up a (church) collection," Willie Moore quoted Brown as having told him. "...He'd preach a year, somethin' like that six months again. He could *preach* you know..." Those who heard House preach in Hernando and at the Morning Star Baptist Church between Banks and Robinsonville shared this opinion. "...If you was a Christian or *said* you was one and hear him preach and sing one of them 'Doctor Watt' (i.e., a hymn)," reported Elizabeth Moore, "you'd just know that Reverend was *right*. He really could sing and he really could preach."

Driven by professional desperation, the weak-voiced Willie Brown developed a similar talent for nagging. Willie Moore recalled: "...Willie Brown would go to the church where Son House was pastorin'. He'd tell him, say: 'Well, I *sho* need you.' Willie Brown would swear he done quit (music). Next time Willie would hear him he'd be playin'." Unluckily for House, others heard him, too. "He went to carryin' on so bad," Elizabeth said, "until the church folks didn't want him. They got rid of him an' he run back, then back." Running from the devil and Willie Brown, House landed a pulpit at Commerce, but his reputation ran with him, and "the members up there put him outta business," Elizabeth noted. Then, in 1933, Patton attempted to put House back in business, as a gospel singer.

"...He got somebody to write a letter to Willie and tell us about H.C. Speirs (*sic*) was wantin' us to come down with him and make some records," recalled House, who was under the delusion that Speir operated a commercial record label. The basis of this overture would seem to have been Patton's desire to play a joke on Speir. After meeting House and Brown by pre-arrangement in Skene, Patton rehearsed them as a gospel group. Using the name of a bluff set beyond nearby Boyle, Patton waggishly christened them the Locust Ridge

Saints. As they auditioned for Speir as a fresh act, Patton stationed himself behind his friends and sang with a hat pulled down across his forehead.

"He was dressed up like a Sunday preacher," recalled Speir, who had not solicited Patton's audition. "I almost bust my gut laughin'. I pretended I didn't know who he was, and when I asked Charlie if he knew any blues he laughed himself."

Patton had coached his companions to present a song called *I Had A Dream Last Night Troubled Me,* the text of which caused House to growl: "That's not religion." Nonetheless, House was unperturbed by what he took to be Patton's ignorant departures from scripture. "We'se just with Charlie, see, and let Charlie do all the leading and singing...we'd just complement along with him." The blues demonstration records Patton made separately for Speir after ending his religious imposture struck House as "a lot of little foolish songs...Charlie, he'd try to make a record out of anything, you know, 'cause he loved to 'clown'..."

House was so enchanted by the records he affected to disdain that he requested copies of them from Speir once he returned to Lake Cormorant. The samples he received "went all haywire" after a few days. As Speir's practice was to forward such records to commercial companies for use as audition material, his willingness to part with them implies that he had written off cronies as commercial prospects.

All told, the unholy three spent about two days in Jackson recording for Speir. On returning to the Delta they spent a week performing around Boyle and living as the house guests of Patton's former wife Millie Barnes Toy and her husband Cliff, whose cordiality to Patton came as a real surprise to House. "...He knowed Charlie used to be his old lady's old man...but yet and still he didn't act like he was jealous...Whole lotta guys won't do that...But Cliff...he treated him just like a brother." On the other hand, Patton's daughter "China Lu" (Willie Mae), who had taken her stepfather's surname, was openly contemptuous of him, as was "Son" Patton, who came to call on the Toys during this period.

To make matters truly Pattonesque there was the inevitable quarreling with Willie Brown, over a subject dear to Patton's heart. A ten dollar bill Patton could not find the morning after a performance led to an acrimonious scene between them: "...He said Willie got it. He laid it on Willie...They didn't do no fightin'; just argue and trick one another...Willie didn't have it; somebody else got it...but he put it on Willie 'cause they slept in the same room that night." A day or so later the Saints went their separate ways. They never saw each other again.

Last Session

All I ask you to do for me: come an' lay me on the coolin' board—*Jesus Is A Dyin' Bedmaker*

Not long after the dissolution of the Locust Ridge Saints, Charlie Patton found himself in a Belzoni, Mississippi jail cell, safer quarters than the house "frolic" from which he had been removed, provided one did not test the tempers of high sheriff John Purvis and his deputy, a man named Webb. "They was pretty rough down in there then," Booker Miller said of them.

At a Belzoni "frolic" Patton had created a disturbance and wound up a prisoner of deputy Webb. "...He got drunk, he told me," David Edwards recalled, "and the police 'rested him and carried him to jail." Booker Miller, who also heard of the incident, remarked: "That's all they coulda got him for (i.e., drunkeness), 'cause he didn't bother nobody."

Patton told Edwards that while sitting in jail he had "made up a song" about the affair. Doubtless mindful of his approaching session, he concocted an updated version of *Tom Rushin'*, which he was to record as *High Sheriff Blues*:

> Get in trouble in Belzona, ain't no use of screamin' an' cryin'
> Mister Webb will take you, back to Belzoni jailhouse flyin'.
>
> ...Lay there late one evenin', Mister Purvis was standin' 'round
> Mister Purvis told Mister Webb to let poor Charlie down.
>
> It takes boozey booze, Lord to cure these blues
> But each day seems like years in a jailhouse where there is no booze.
>
> ...When I was in prison, it ain't no use of screamin' an' cryin'

Mister Purvis' the onliest man can, ease that pain
of mine.

As Patton had derived several of these rhymes from a decade-old Ma Rainey recording, *Booze An' Blues* (credited to T. Guy Suddoth), he had no inkling that the fourth stanza was itself a paraphrase, derived from Oscar Wilde's famous *Ballad of Reading Gaol:*

...each day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.

While Patton was working up material in this fashion, the man who intended to profit by it, W. R. Calaway, was undertaking his own manhunt for him. Calaway, a Florida-based former Paramount dealer who worked as the sales manager of the American Record Company (ARC), had recently received Patton's audition records from H.C. Speir.

Instead of sending Speir a train ticket for Patton's use (as was the custom of the age), Calaway had unexpectedly called upon Speir and announced that he planned to personally deliver Patton to ARC's New York studio. Though he might have been paying a routine sales call in the area (he was known to visit ARC's distributor in Memphis, Earl Montgomery), it was out of character for white record executives of the time to travel with black artists, except through necessity. It is thus possible that Calaway had attempted to contact Patton independently of Speir (perhaps through Montgomery) and visited Jackson only when his efforts failed.

Speir had previously scouted the Delta with Calaway in 1932 for ARC and regarded him as the least principled person in the recording industry. He had grown accustomed to having his discoveries mysteriously turn up on commercial labels that had not approved their test recordings, thus cutting him out of finder's fees. Or, having delivered an artist to a company, he would sometimes find himself frozen out of subsequent transactions with the singer, while the recording director awarded himself a sales royalty as the latter's "manager".

For these reasons, Speir only grudgingly gave Calaway Patton's address.[1] Upon leaving Jackson, Calaway apparently visited Holly Ridge or Heathman, and discovered that Patton had decamped for Belzoni, forty miles beneath Holly Ridge. In Belzoni, he secured Patton's release from jail, as Speir had done on a previous occasion by writing (at Patton's request) a character reference on his behalf. "I don't know what it was he got into; mighta been a debt or somethin,'" Speir said of the earlier incident.

If Patton had intended to record with Willie Brown and Son House, these plans were undercut by Calaway's unexpected arrival: to recruit them from Lake Cormorant would have involved a detour of one hundred and twenty five miles. Their inaccessability may have opened a studio door for Bertha Lee, whom Patton had likely unsuccessfully auditioned for H.C. Speir.[2]

To recruit Bertha for the session, Patton would have returned to Heathman via the Moorhead branch of the "Dog", which began at Belzoni. The engineer of this route, whose locomotive was designated engine number 1066, was a man named Charley Bradley, whose dark features led Delta blacks to consider him an Italian. Renowned for his exhibitionistic whistle-blowing, he was the subject of another recent local color confection by Patton: *Charley Bradley's Ten Sixty Six Blues*. "That man was 'bad' about that engine, an' he was a clowner, too," Booker Miller fondly recalled. David Edwards was less taken with his antics, remarking: "He was a kinda mean guy...He'd get there an' blow that whistle and if you didn't get off that track, he'd run over you. I know he killed a lotta people..."

Patton's designation of Bertha Lee as a recording partner was to puzzle House, who would know nothing of their collaboration until questioned about it thirty years later. "...She wasn't interested in singing," House said of her. "I never heard her sing no blues but I heard her sing some church songs," said Elizabeth Moore, who had known her in the mid-Twenties. Patton must have found her studio presence particularly useful to him, for his voice had been damaged when his throat had been slashed the previous year. "He still had his voice, but he had a kinda hoarseness in it," David Edwards reported.

In addition to eight religious duets, they would record four blues vocal duets (including *Whiskey Distillery*). Only two of their duets reached the market: *Oh Death* and *Troubled 'Bout My Mother.* On both of these works, it is Bertha who sings lead, with Patton providing episodic punctuation. Bertha might have learned the former song while singing in the choir of the First Baptist Church in Lula; The Delta Big Four (who were attached to the same church) had previously recorded it at Grafton as *I Know My Time Ain't Long.*

Patton seems to have expected his commercial sponsors to include Brown and House on his recording venture even after departing for New York with Bertha and Calaway by way of Meridian on the Southern railroad. It could only have been to mollify him that ARC subsequently dispatched letters inviting the pair to join the session in progress, offers that were patently rhetorical as the company sent them no travel tickets.

During their train ride, Bertha was to tell record collector Bernard Klatzko, Calaway had Patton recite the lyrics of the songs he intended to record, and committed them to paper. It was evidently his intention to copyright them.

Patton traveled with a new guitar, a Gibson with a black top. "I don't think he lost it," Booker Miller said of the Stella he had previously used. "I just think he beat the sound out of it, 'cause Charlie was *rough* on boxes. It took a Gibson to stand up to him."

When the trio arrived in Grand Central Station, New York was in the midst of one its harshest winters in history, which must have caused Patton considerable discomfort, all the moreso as he was suffering a cold.[3] The company's blues artists then boarded at the famous Hotel Theresa at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue; while ensconsed there, Patton would perform at the hotel and on Harlem streets.

Calaway escorted the couple to the ARC studio in the twenty-three story Lazarus Building at Broadway and 57th Street, which housed many music firms, as well the American Academy of Music. Arthur Satherly, an Englishman who had worked for Paramount and QRS the previous decade, supervised ARC's recording and probably worked jointly with Calaway in recording Patton and Bertha.

The American Record Company was derided by Yank Rachel (a Tennessee bluesman who entered its studio within a week of Patton's departure) as "the cheapest company I ever worked for." Operated as a subsidiary of the Pennsylvania-based Scranton Button Company, it was (like the latter) controlled by Herbert Yates (1880-1961), an English businessman who would soon take over Republic Pictures. Yates was noted for his crassness within a crass industry, and of his film company it has been written: "...the studio was devoted to money rather than to movie-making. No A-budget pictures were produced—most films were made for less than $100,000...most writers called it 'Repulsive' Studios and spoke of it as a prison."[4]

In the record industry ARC was likewise a low-budget commodity. Its products sold at thirty-five cents apiece, or three for a dollar. "The big business was on the Victor label and the Brunswick label, and they were higher priced," recalled J.B. Long, a North Carolina dealer.[5] Though ARC also operated Brunswick, the cheaper Vocalion label on which it placed Patton was largely given over to rustic music. The year before it added Patton to its roster ARC had recorded nearly two hundred blues and gospel titles, a phenomenal total considering the moribund condition of the industry. It was, therefore, a logical commercial outlet for Charlie Patton in 1934.

When Patton came to ARC the company was in the process of building up a catalog in hopes of becoming a credible label to dealers. It sold its product directly to retailers and permitted them to order as little as one copy of any catalog item. Because ARC lacked a retinue of salesmen to promote its releases, such dealers as Long did not select their wares from sample records. Long

(and doubtless most ARC dealers) ordered only works by artists whose names were already known to him. In this scheme of things Patton's sales appeal should have seemed rather doubtful, for it is unlikely that ARC had built up a substantial line of Mississippi dealers.

The company's intensive recording procedures marked a departure from the practice of the previous decade. In the 1920s a company would typically record between two and six titles by an unknown "race" artist, issue them as a sales probe, and return the musician to the studio only in the event of success. "They milked 'em dry; got everything they had," Earl Montgomery said of the ARC approach. ARC recording totals were astronomical: its ordinary sessions of the early 1930s ran for two or three days and resulted in as many as twenty-five titles, the figure rarely falling below ten. By following this procedure the company thus had a backlog of material available for release if the artist in question happened to produce a hit. Instead of having to escalate recording fees (as did companies in the 1920s) to keep successful artists in tow, ARC had a lock on their repertoires at the cut-rate prices blues unknowns could command.

ARC managed to afford its marathon sessions by paying its artists practically nothing. As an ARC property the popular country and western singer Roy Acuff was to receive $250 for recording twenty sides in 1936. The blues act earned even less; Earl Montgomery thought that the company customarily paid blues singers forty or fifty dollars per session, which might (considering the length of ARC sessions) average out to a mere two dollars per side. Whereas the typical firm of the Twenties (having a higher investment to recoup) usually attempted to issue its stockpile of recordings, the ARC policy was to junk all remaining titles by an artist whose initial releases did not turn out to be hits.

The company's indiscriminate recording approach only increased the odds of commercial miscarriage. Having a large quantity of material to pick from, it was by no means certain that ARC executives were in a position to distinguish front-line repertoire pieces from works that trickled forth in response to the company's milking process. ARC's first Patton release, *Poor Me*, would illustrate the inadequacies of its approach, and the limitations of Arthur Satherley as its guiding executive. A fourteen and a half bar ditty (with a fifteen bar opening stanza), *Poor Me* was but the twenty-third piece Patton had seen fit to record. It was neither a dance tune nor a blues, and did not belong to Patton's performing repertoire, as Booker Miller never heard him play it. Satherley's approval of the first take of *Poor Me* indicated his ineptitude as a recording director: Patton persistently went off-key while singing the phrase-ending keynote of each chorus.

Patton was obviously an ideal act from ARC's venal perspective: he produced more sides than any company artist had previously managed to produce

in an ongoing session. Despite a heavy cough that disrupted his recording, he completed twenty-six sides in the course of a three-day session beginning on January 30th, 1934.[6] His issued works did not sell appreciably, and as a result ARC was to release only five of the thirteen records that his session could have engendered. They were to prove Patton's final legacy, documenting his decline as a bluesman. For when finally corraled by a label with respectable sound quality, Patton was no longer the spectacular performer of yore. He was a dying man.

Patton's ARC performances are remarkable in view of the fact that only eighty-eight days of life remained to him when he entered the studio. He may have done so with misgivings concerning the advisability of recording at ARC rates and of perpetuating his career as a blues singer in the face of declining health.

Booker Miller, who was acquainted with Patton's spiritual recordings for Paramount, observed: "After his death, I figured that's why he would 'cross over', you know, and record those church songs. I figured he might have been thinkin' about it (dying), but he didn't discuss it with me. Some things'd be on your mind, you know; you don't mention it." While six blues comprised Patton's first day of recording, at least four of the eleven titles he produced the following day were spirituals, as were the first three of nine songs that constituted his last day's output.

The possibility that Patton was disgruntled by his recording fees and entertained the thought of going elsewhere is pointed up by his failure to record his updated version of *High Water*, a glaring omission in view of his re-make of the less popular *Shake It And Break It*. For that matter, he did not hazard a re-make of *Banty Rooster*, which still counted as one of his theme songs.

When Booker Miller heard samples of Patton's 1934 recordings, he opined that they fell below the caliber of the live performances Patton was capable of even in the waning weeks of his career. He blamed their inferiority on his partner's imagined sobriety. "You see, we had our juice with us then," he said of their live appearances. "A man can kinda 'come up' when he got that." Yet the Patton who recorded for Paramount should have been the more sober performer. A black stranger in the midwestern towns of Richmond, Indiana or Grafton, Wisconsin during the heyday of Prohibition was not likely to ferret out local sources of liquor, particularly on the weekdays that were given over to recording. But Prohibition had recently been repealed when Patton recorded for ARC, and it would be naive to suppose that Patton arrived at his sessions without fortifying himself with alcohol that was plentiful on 125th Street.

Whatever his state of sobriety, the Patton who recorded for ARC was still a masterful guitarist, as the precision with which he followed the nuances of

his singing on *High Sheriff* and *Poor Me* demonstrated. He was still a dynamic entertainer, as his inspired comedic performance of *Hang It On The Wall* indicated. He was still capable of novel surprises, such as the fleeting falsetto he interjected in single stanzas of *High Sheriff* and *Jersey Bull*, and the unexpected measure of double time he played in the coda of *34 Blues*. Yet his artistry was primarily perpetuated in small spurts and insignificant touches.

As a singer Patton had lost wind and volume since recording in 1930. He no longer had the ability to sustain phrases that he had used to impart a unique sound to *Pony* and *Down The Dirt Road*. In the first stanza of *Stone Pony Blues*, a sluggish remake of *Pony*, he variously held phrase-ending words for two, three and five beats, without employing the diminuendo "fade-out" effect that had marked the two bar hold of *Pony*. In *34 Blues*, a slower and equally sluggish rendition of *Down The Dirt Road*, he generally held the final word of a phrase for one measure instead of six beats, as he had done in the original version. Even this clipped delivery imposed an apparent strain on him, for he consistently gave himself a respite by intrumentalizing the sixth beat of the first phrase of each stanza. He similarly husbanded his waning vocal resources in performing *Revenue Man*, an adapation of *Maggie*. In singing its first phrase he variously used the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth beats as a vocal rest; in singing the second phrase the sixth beat was used as a rest in the second, third, and fourth verses. Though Patton managed to interject these pauses so gracefully as to make them practically unnoticeable, his early material was devoid of mid-line vocal rests.

When Patton declaimed *Jersey Bull* and *Love My Stuff* (two other remakes of *Maggie*) in a "hollering" style, his voice lacked volume. By casting the former piece in the absolute key of Bb (a half or full step lower than its various companions) he should have been able to sing with relatively little strain on his voice. Yet whereas the ordinary ceiling tone of *Maggie* lay a fifth above the keynote, he seldom ventured above the interval of a minor third in this rendition.

Patton's fingers seemed equally unable to bear the burden of powerful music. Apart from renditions of *Maggie*, his thumb work was unaccountably minimal and weak. Whereas the rhythmic impact of *Pony Blues* depended partly upon forceful bass interjections, *Stone Pony* had little bass work to speak of; in the first phrase of its title couplet, only a single beat (the sixth) featured prominent bass notes. The supporting bass work of *Shake It And Break It* was likewise absent from *Hang It On The Wall*, which had a lop-sided treble emphasis.

In recording *Revenue Man Blues*, the tenth offering of his second day's session, Patton mysteriously returned to his form of 1929 and 1930, summoning up a *Maggie* that rivaled the intensity of *High Water* and *Moon Going Down*.

His rousing performance and the apparent indifference of ARC to its merits (it became the final release of the session) gave unissued titles like *Black Cow Blues*, *Bed Bugs And Snakes*, *The Delta Murder*, *Whiskey Distillery*, and *Move Your Trunk* (his final recording), a provocative cast.

Patton's ARC recordings appear to have been a mixture of current repertoire songs and inventions intended for the session. Miller was acquainted with the likes of *Revenue Man*, *Whiskey Distillery* ("I remember it too many times!"), *Till The Day Is Done* ("That was a good one, all right"), *Southern Whistle*, and *Move Your Trunk*. He never heard Patton play *The Delta Murder*, *Charley Bradley's 1066 Blues*, *My Man Blues*, or such spirituals as *Stoop Down* and *Oh Lord I'm In Your Hands*.

It is likely that *Stone Pony* (an expression Miller saw as meaning "a man hard—do things in a big way") and *34 Blues* were specifically designed for recording purposes, as Patton's original versions of the songs were still in vogue among his audience. The former song appeared to broadcast an attachment to a girl friend in Rayville, Louisiana:

> I got me a stone pony, don't ride shetlands no more
> You can find my stone pony, hooked to my rider's door.
>
> Vicksburg's my pony, Rayville is my grey mare
> You can find my stone pony, down in Louisiana tied somewhere.

Patton had performed in Rayville (a small town across the Mississippi River from Vicksburg) in the 1920s with a fiddler, possibly John Nance. The pair had traveled "out from Bolton...over there to Brownsville," according to Ishmon Bracey. "Vicksburg—that's the both of 'ems home," Bracey surmised. "Right across the river from Vicksburg."

Jersey Bull Blues (a theme he either borrowed from Bill Broonzy's 1932 recording of *Bull Cow Blues* or provided for the latter) dramatized philandering from the standpoint of both a husband and wife:

> If you've got a good bullcow you oughta, feed your bull good at home.
> It may come along a young heifer an' just, tow your bull from home.
>
> Oh, my bull's in a pasture be, where there ain't no grass

"Boy it ain't no grass in this pasture!"
I swear every minute it seems, like it's gonna be my last.

Topical matters that engaged the attention of many contemporary blues singers appeared to hold no interest for Patton. A prognosis for the coming year that concluded *34 Blues* was based on the archaic counsel of Proverbs 27:1, which advised: "...thou knowest not what a day may bring forth:"

It may bring sorrow, Lord an' it may bring tears
Oh Lord oh Lord, happy be your bran'-new year.

Patton's own prescription for banishing care and sorrow was to carouse with women and numb himself with alcohol, amenities that came readily to blues singers. "There's three things wasn't no object: that's womens, whiskey, and food," Booker Miller said. "You didn't have to worry about nothin' like that." In the process of becoming a blues singer, however, Patton had assumed a disreputable social identity, making him the outcast he depicted on *Stone Pony*:

Vicksburg on a high hill, Natchez just below
An' I can't feel welcome, rider nowhere I go.

As a blues singer, he had become an imagined enemy of God, who was thought to have an eternity of hellfire in store for musicians who had provided sinful dance music for revelers. It was no wonder that Patton and his Fundamentalist peers anesthetized themselves with alcohol: theirs was a calling that tortured the psyche. The encounter with an evil spirit Patton visualized in *Love My Stuff* appears to have been a figament of Fundamentalist rhetoric:

Oh the lights burnin' dim in the levee (blast) camp again
It must be the devil, a-strikin' terror again.

Oh I'm gonna leave Mississippi nappy, 'fore it be too late
It may be like '27 highwater, swear it just won't wait.

"Nappy means fast," Booker Miller said, who gave the term a secondary meaning of "disagreeable". The belief the dimming lights betrayed the approach

of spirits was an ancient superstition that Shakespeare had used to signal the visit of the murdered Caesar to Brutus' tent, causing the latter to rave: "How ill this taper burns! — Ha! who comes here?...some god, some angel, or some devil/That makest my blood run cold, and my hair to stare?"[7] Whether Patton was staging the same scene for laughs is anyone's guess.

Though evil spirits did not roam the Delta house "frolic", the homicidal patron was ever present there. Patton's unissued *Delta Murder* could have commemorated any number of plantation bloodlettings, such as the one that had brought pandemonium to a "frolic" he had serenaded the previous fall at Will Richards' plantation near Inverness. Enraged by a party-goer's advances to her youthful daughter, Mandy Whigman reports, a female patron hacked him to death with an axe, whereupon her son dispatched a second person in the same fashion. The axe murder appears to have been the latest word in house "frolic" homicide, bringing a new dimension of slaughter to an already sordid setting.

On the week-end of April 8, 1934, Patton and his partner Booker Miller were providing Saturday night entertainment at a dance on Strickland's plantation near Greenwood, a favorite Patton watering-spot. "Oh man, we'se knockin' 'em out there," Miller recalled. Towards morning a couple began quarreling outside the premises, where a double-bit axe was kept. "...This man aimed to go out that gate and that lady hit him with that axe," Miller said. "He was dead when we left there and we left there as quick as we could..." As chaos erupted Patton turned to Miller and shouted: "I'm gettin' outta here!" Once Patton fled into the night Miller never saw him again.

Patton had arrived at the "frolic" with a woman named Willie whose light complexion caused Miller to take her for a Creole (a Louisianan of French or Spanish descent). She may have been the companion he boasted of in *Stone Pony Blues* and the help-mate he touted on *Jersey Bull Blues*:

> I throw a five-pound axe an' I just dropped in your town
> An' I got Willie now behind me to drive that ol' axe on down.

To Miller, Patton appeared carefree and healthy. "I never heard him complain...about nothin' much," he said of Patton's health. At Strickland's plantation, "he didn't act like he was sick. When a man's breath go to tanglin' with him, it stops him from singin' a lot." Yet Patton had long since come to the end of his physical resources, and was sustaining himself on will power alone. In short order, Tom Cannon recalls, "he lost his breath...couldn't lay down." These

classic symptoms of heart failure became severe enough to cause him to visit a physician in Indianola on April 17th, two days after ARC issued *Stone Pony Blues*.

Eleven days later, on April 28th, Patton died five miles away on the Heathman-Dedham plantation, apparently in the company of the last of his dozen-odd common-law wives, Willie. He had just reached or was about to reach his forty-third birthday. "It went out over the country like wildfire when he died," Miller said. "And when I heard it, I woulda rather heard anything than heard that."

Epilogue

"He was just a man could pick a guitar,
and I loved it: I loved to be around
him and with him."—Booker Miller

If anything, word of Patton's death spread erratically through the Delta, providing ample time and opportunity for bizarre private fictions concerning him to become public legends. Within a few days of the occurrence news of it reached Sam Chatmon in Hollandale, thirty miles southeast of Heathman. "Somebody come in, say: 'Is Charlie Patton your brother?'" Sam recalled. "I say: 'Yeah.' Say: 'He's dead; they buried him yesterday.'" Though Chatmon's kinship with Patton was at best dubious and his acquaintance with him at most casual, he was to play upon these matters four decades later in the interests of enlarging his prestige among blues enthusiasts, demonstrating the continuing magic of Patton's name as a Mississippi blues figure.

In the first week of May, 1934, David Edwards was making his way towards Holly Ridge in hopes of picking up work as Patton's accompanist. "...They told me when I come to Indianola — that was about twelve miles from Holly Ridge — they said: 'Charlie Patton died last week.' I said: 'No!' So I went on by there: a little old gravel road through the country...Before I got to his house, there's a cemetery right 'side the gravel road, and I looked around and seen the fresh grave there; they had just buried him...I went to his peoples' house and stayed up all night with them..."

Patton's most recent "wife" Willie was not among these "people", who consisted of Bertha Lee, his uncle Sherman Martin, and the latter's wife Aida. The missing woman was undoubtedly the Willie Calvin of Heathman who had served as the informant for Patton's death certificate, which pointed up the ambiguity of his marital affairs. Though the document detailed the county of Patton's birth and the names of his parents, the entry for the name of his wife was completed with the phrase "d.k.," an abbreviation of "don't know". It would seem that Willie was reluctant to accord this distinction to Bertha Lee, whose name must have been familiar to her.

Tom Cannon recalls that a "world of people" would attend Patton's funeral in Holly Ridge. This world did not include Willie Calvin, Patton's daughter Willie Mae, or any blues singers.

Son House and Willie Brown were in Lake Cormorant when a wire from Bertha Lee informed them of Patton's death, which House was to attribute to mumps. Though both had been willing to attend the recording sessions Patton had arranged for them, neither cared to attend his funeral.

Viola Cannon would use the occasion of the funeral to impress her son Tom with the fact that he "lived a fast life, and it carried him down". She had doubtless gleaned this observation from contemporary preachers, who reasoned (in the words of one recorded sermon of the age) that the "little habit of drinkin' moonshine...carried thousands of men and women, boys and girls, to a disgraceful life an' to an untimely death..."[1]

Yet the ailment that had killed Patton had nothing to do with his life-style. The doctor who had examined him less than two weeks before his death diagnosed him as a mitral heart valve case, a then-incurable disorder that ranked among the most common forms of heart disease. Except when congenital the disease is a sequela arising from rheumatic fever, itself an untreatable condition within Patton's lifetime. The initial rheumatic fever would have attacked Patton either in early childhood (between 1894-1896) or early puberty (1902-1904), leaving scar tissue that would have constricted his heart valve and produced symptoms of mitral valve malfunction some ten or fifteen years afterwards: shortness of breath and chronic fatigue (due to lung congestation which forces the heart to overwork). In addition, the disease would have produced a heart murmur sufficient to disqualify Patton from military service in the First World War.

Though the severity of symptoms and rapidity of their onset varies between individuals, Patton's physical condition would have probably become subnormal at some point between 1904 and 1919. It is practically certain that the Patton who was able to produce unsurpassed blues recordings in 1929 was already contending with a handicap that would have impaired his ability to sing and play. During the last six months or year of his career his deteriorating condition would have taken a severe toll of his resources. Yet as he struggled against debility Patton concealed his condition from associates, perhaps in the belief that it was due to drink, or God's displeasure with his calling.

Ultimately Patton was a casualty not of fast living, but of poor living, for rheumatic fever is associated with poverty. As one medical textbook states: "Like many diseases, rheumatic fever appears most frequently in population groups receiving a low income. Crowding, dampness, and poor nutrition are common in such populations..."[2]

In death Patton continued to pay a price he could no longer feel for flouting the mores of his society. An ex-wife from Merigold named Udy fed Hayes McMullen a lurid tale of his demise. "...He was gettin' ready to go—he had

done dressed, you know — to go make music at a picnic," McMullen reports. "...And (Udy) said it wasn't even cloudy. Sittin' on his porch practicin' with his guitar. And lightnin' struck him. That's what Udy said: she said she was his wife at that time." Such must have been the retribution Udy wished on Patton, for it was a common rural black belief that God, in Zeus fashion, destroyed "mean" people with thunderbolts.[3]

No less imaginary was the posthumous glory Viola Cannon tried to heap upon him. She told her son Tom that the American Record Company had built a monument to Patton's memory, which was installed at the singer's grave-site. But no one else, including Tom, ever saw it. The company did not even bother to copyright Patton's material, and if its executives so much as learned of his death, they were so little impressed by this fact that they issued no tribute records on his behalf. The company would unceremoniously release *Love My Stuff* some four months after Patton died, on September 1, 1934. The next and last Patton release, *Hang It On The Wall*, appeared nearly a year after his death, on April 15, 1935. With that ARC wrote Patton off as a wasted investment, and when a record collector attempted to retrieve file copies of Patton's remaining work from Columbia (which had acquired ARC in 1938) three decades later, he discovered that the control numbers from Patton's session had been re-assigned to specimens of Chinese music.

Though Patton's musical sounds were not commercially obsolete at the time of his death, they failed to survive him. He was simply too skilled and too unorthodox to give rise to anything better than crude imitation. While some of Patton's ambitious innovations (such as his use of two or three accompaniment lines for a single vocal phrase) should have had an impact on subsequent blues-playing, they did not.

In the end, Patton's musical imagination proved to be too large for the Delta, a confined area of both space and thought. He remained most memorable as a personal presence, a symbol of frivolity in an age of morose religion, and as a figure who embodied all that was boisterous and excessive about the culture that supported him. To his associates the baffling being who was Patton often took precedence over the performer, and the happy palaverer who was one face of Charlie Patton often took precedence over the rest of him. Forty-five years after Patton departed from his company under the edict of a planter who had naively construed Patton's musical ability as a good character reference, Frank Howard of Tribbet had no recollection of him as a musician. "Sometime I think of words I heard him say, and jokin'; carryin' on with folks..." he said.

If Patton had used his musical talents as a means of obtaining social license, he had nonetheless understood as did few of his peers that the best way to amass a following was to offer his public a novel and distinctive sound, a

seductive dance beat, and an arresting stage personality. Towards these ends he succeeded superbly. As a means of imposing his presence on noisy and easily distracted street and saloon gatherings, his bellowing voice and bouncing guitar were peerless instruments. By the end of his life, however, commercial technology had made Patton a figure from a forever vanished epoch.

It was during the early 1930s that the jukebox began to displace live entertainers in Mississippi cafes and roadhouses, amplifying voices that were otherwise unprepossessing. The guitar, as well, was becoming obsolete as a medium of solo music, and the last Delta bluesman to become a hit-maker with a solo guitar, Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup (1905-1974), felt miscast as a self-accompanied musician in the 1940s.

"...By '40 they begin to use bands," H.C. Speir observed of Mississippi blues singers. "The guitar and a couple of trumpets...and that begin to take over; when they put these records on the jukebox, you understand...that would create more attention than it would when a Negro was playin' a regular old blues. The big fish was eatin' up the little fish."

The fish who swam against this musical tide were, as always, considered sharks by their male contemporaries, who continued to make their careers hazardous to pursue. As a loner, Booker Miller continued to perpetuate the music he had absorbed from Patton: "...I haven't found but one man I could play with, and that was Charlie," he was to say. "I like-ted Charlie's style, and that's the only way I played." At a cafe in Moss Island he was offering his regular assortment of Patton tunes and Delta standards in 1937 when, returning from an intermission break, he found his seat occupied by a strange female.

"...It ain't but one chair in the room...and she had the box across her lap," he recalled. "I didn't know her—I don't bother with women, you know, 'cause I don't know who their men are..." Before Miller had figured out a way to deal with this situation her escort appeared on the scene. "He said: 'Get up!,' say: 'You can't pick it; give it to him and let him pick it, and if he don't wanna pick it I'll throw it outdoors.'

"...I say: 'No, you better give me the box 'cause if you throw this box outdoors I'm afraid you're goin' out there behind it.' And I bent my head down to tune a string, and that fella hit at my head with a dog-iron outta the fireplace.

"...I didn't want him to swing a second time: I hit him. Well, he staggered back and drawed back (the iron) and this buddy of mine took it out of his hand.

"It was many places like that...That's the reason I wouldn't want my kids to know nothin' (first hand) of that: I didn't want none of 'em to go out like that."

For the sake of self-preservation and in the interests of setting an example for his children Miller sold his guitar to David Edwards, terminated his career at age twenty-seven, and went into the Baptist ministry. The harshest words

he could find for Charlie Patton included a note of self-criticism: "Sometimes when I get to thinkin' about it now," he reflected in 1967, "I think we done a little too much of some things and not enough of another...But that's all in life. You got to learn to live it: what to live it for." By Miller's standards Patton lived a well-spent life, not only because he mastered what for Miller was an arduous undertaking, but because he enriched Miller's own life, which was cut off by lung cancer in 1969. Alone among Patton's remaining companions Miller would say unashamedly: "I loved him; I really did."

Patton's former mistress Bertha Lee, who eventually moved to Chicago (there to die in 1975) and operated a small thrift shop, implied that he was chiefly noteworthy because he loved her. She told record collector Bernard Klatzko that Patton had died in her arms, proclaiming: "You're gonna have it tough from now on."

The level of regard she and Viola Cannon had for Patton at the time of his death is indicated by their treatment of his remains. Though Patton was entitled to free burial beside his parents and brother Will C. on *Dockery's*, where Viola and his brother "Son" still lived, he was consigned to an obscure Holly Ridge gravesight that had long since become a forgotten patch of weeds by the early 1960s. Apparently the Patton who had voiced his desire to join his mother in the "kingdom" in *Troubled 'Bout My Mother* was considered unfit to occupy the same burial ground as a woman whose adultery had cast doubt on his parentage.

In 1940 Patton's brother "Son" left *Dockery's* for Gary, Indiana, where he died of a stroke at age sixty-three on September 3, 1957. Reputedly a bootlegger during part of the period he spent on *Dockery*, he had likely become a disreputable figure during the ensuing years, for his widow declined to assign him an occupation while fleshing out his death certificate.

Although Patton's former wife Millie Barnes stated that their daughter Willie Mae died in 1950 at Mound Bayou under the name Willie Mae Money, the state of Mississippi has no contemporary record of her death. She was apparently Patton's only direct descendant.

Viola Cannon died in Greenville on August 8, 1969 at the age of eighty-two. The last of the Patton clan, she was buried in *Dockery's True Light* cemetery.

It was a summer day in the Delta, a year after the death of Viola Cannon. An enfeebled dying man in his eighties who had once been the *Pea Vine*'s brakeman was discharged from a hospital in Cleveland. With death imminent, he was seized by a desire to visit his old homestead at *Dockery's*. There were three or four families remaining as tenants of the plantation, and none of them knew him except by nickname: "George Hobo".

As they sat on their porches, the male crone before them droned on in garbled and feverish fashion about his old friend Charlie Patton, the one-time dandy of *Dockery's* and demon of the Delta. The name was only familiar to them as a half-recollected relic from another time. Politely, they waited for him to change the subject. But their gnarled visitor either knew no other subject to talk about, or imagined that no other subject would engage the interest of a group of strangers to himself. Oblivious to their blank stares, he rambled on about Patton for the better part of the afternoon. George Hobo was so deaf that it was impossible to convey their embarrassed boredom to him. There was nothing to do but wait politely until the old man finally ran out of steam and departed, to their relief.

Footnotes

Footnotes - Chapter One

1. Matt Dakin, a planter who found Mexicans so numerous on his own plantation that he was forced to learn Spanish around 1912, recalled their early guitar-playing.

2. While living near Itta Bena, Miller saw such blues-players as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Rube Lacy, Tommy Johnson, Robert Johnson, and Willie Brown. He also heard Blind Blake in Chicago.

3. On recordings Johnson is primarily distinctive for a falsetto yodel.

4. It is quite likely that Speir's enthusiasm was transmitted to the officialdom of Paramount Records, the company that recorded Patton. While its recording director (Arthur Laibly) was not taken by the ability of any blues guitarist he recorded, Patton would be lauded for his guitar expertise in the company advertisement for *Pony Blues* placed in *The Chicago Defender,* which stated: "What he can't do with a guitar ain't worth mentioning." None of the company's other artists received comparable advertising praise.

5. Ishmon Bracey and Skip James both reported that Laibly gave them a single drink prior to the beginning of their 1930 and 1931 sessions. It is possible that an original "dry" recording policy was afterwards modified.

6. When the interviewer protested this statement Bracey added: "Charlie Patton had two-three..."

7. Handy: "The Significance of the Blues: *Talking Machine Journal*: August, 1919: p. 50.

8. As Chatmon demonstrated this gesture, Patton would cup his ear with his left hand while singing in a simulated posture of woe.

9. Such is indicated by House's report that Patton played *Down The Dirt Road* (one of his most popular pieces) with a flatpick, a technical impossibility.

10. So recalled Nellie Hester of Renova.

Footnotes - Chapter 2

1. "Mostly you'll find nicknames for people," Miller remarked, in regards to blues singers.

2. "Charlie took a good picture," Miller recalled. To his great regret, the photograph was destroyed in a house fire.

3. Though Patton had a favorable reaction to Son House's account of his own career as a pastor, he never intimated to House that he had done any preaching. He may well have balked at exposing his lack of real credentials for this role, which House would have readily discerned. House considered Patton an ignoramous in regards to religious texts; Booker Miller, who was not a church-goer when he met Patton, was prepared to believe that he had been a preacher because "he acted like one", even as a carousing blues singer.

4. According to Son House, Patton was actually attracted to "sanctified" music, "'cause there's a whole lotta jumpin' in it," and he imparted a "sanctified" twist to his spirituals by playing them with a dance beat.

5. W.J. Cash: *The Mind Of The South*: Vintage edition: New York: 1960: p. 44. This passage alludes to the Southern white.

6. Bo Carter reported: "I worked on doctor shows, I used to play for doctors one time. I'd say, 'What did the rooster say to the hen?' Ask the doctor that." Cf. Paul Oliver: *Conversations With The Blues*: Horizon Press: New York: 1965: p. 84.

7. Zora Neal Hurston: *Mules and Men*: Harper and Row reprint of the 1935 edition: New York: 1970: p. 305.

8. "Any a-us would 'clown', you know, (when) we got far enough out there in the booze," Miller said. "...You start cuttin' up with the people you know."

Footnotes - Chapter Three

1. Spoken during a PBS telecast of *The Firing Line* (December 12, 1972).

2. The very term "bright" apparently perpetuated its obsolete standard English meaning of "beautiful". Cf. *The Oxford English Dictionary.*

3. Davis, Gardner, and Gardner: *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*: University of Chicago Press: Chicago: 1941: p. 41.

4. The others were Anderson (b. 1862), Rosa (b. 1865), and Marriah Patten (b. 1875).

5. At the eve of the Civil War, a third of the county's farmers owned no more than ten slaves. Cf. Owsley: *Plain Folk of The Old South*: Louisiana State University: Baton Rouge: p. 14.

6. "...In them hills out there," David Edwards generalized, "them old colored women'd slip-off...You don't catch nothin' but them old half-white boys and half-white girls out there...There's more of that in the hills than in the Delta." Sam's grandmother "Creasie" Hammond was herself "half-Indian and half-white," he reported.

7. Such muddled thinking underlies Robert Palmer's presentation of Patton in *Deep Blues* (Viking: New York: 1981: p. 65).

8. An 1881 birth year Viola ventured in an interview four years later with David Evans subsequently became the basis of latter's depictions of Patton as a "blues pioneer".

9. Lonnie, later to achieve fame with the Mississippi Sheiks, was born in June of 1888, and his brother Bo (born Armenta Chatmon) in January of 1894.

10. In addition to Lonnie and Bo, these were Ferdinand (b. 1885), Laurie (b. 1888), Fred (b. 1890), Willie Edgar (b. 1895), Lamar (b. 1897), and Sam (b. 1899).

11. Charles Nordhoff: *The Cotton States In The Spring and Summer of 1875*: D. Appleton and Company: New York: 1876: p. 81.

12. This spelling was used by the American Record Company on Patton's 1934 recordings; the Paramount label billed him as "Charley Patton".

13. Newman White: *American Negro Folk-Songs*: Folklore Associates reprint of the 1928 edition: Hatboro, Pennsylvania: 1965: p. 70.

14. Puckett: *Folk Beliefs Of The Southern Negro*: Dover reprint of the 1926 edition: New York: 1969: p. 485.

15. Cf. Calt, "The Country Blues As Meaning," in Grossman, Calt, and Grossman: *Country Blues Songbook*: Music Sales: New York: 1973: p. 16, 23.

16. Odum and Johnson: *The Negro And His Songs*: Folklore Associates reprint of the 1925 editon: Hatboro, Pennsylvania: 1964: p. 69.

17. E.C. Perrow: "Songs and Rhymes From The South: in *The Journal Of American Folklore*: Vol. XXVI: 1913: p. 123.

18. *Northfield Hymnal*: Biglow & Main Company: Chicago: 1904: Number 152.

19. By the fall of 1897 fear of yellow fever had acted to disperse the population of Edwards to such an extent that the Delta town of Rosedale issued a proclamation forbidding anyone from Edwards to enter community limits without obtaining a health certificate.

20. The family was present for a Hinds County census-taking in 1900.

21. Cf. Hubbard: *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music*: New York: Irving Squire: 1910: p. 334.

22. Cf. Bengt Olsson's sleeve notes to *Cannon's Jug Stompers*: Herwin LP 208.

23. Leadbelly recalled its popularity in Louisiana "around 1910, 1909, 1908, and seven". (Cf. *Leadbelly's Last Sessions*: Folkways Fa 2942). W.C. Handy made a national hit of it in 1916, after learning it from "a wandering musician who said he had it from a hymn." (Handy: *A Treasury Of The Blues*: 1949 reprint of the 1926 edition: Charles Boni: New York: pp. 243-244.)

24. Cf. Handy: *Father Of The Blues*: Collier reprint of the 1941 edition: New York: 1970: pp. 147-148.

25. One Delta club only admitted patrons who flashed a $100 gambling stake, Willie Moore recalled.

26. Willie Moore said: "...They play Skin, and they play Blackjack, too, and Five Up, and Cotch...Eight a-Kings—that was poker, too."

27. Barrelhouse robberies were nonetheless chronic, often staged by gangs of five or six who overwhelmed the floorwalker and created chaos by knocking over the kerosene lamps that illuminated the establishment.

28. Stone: *Studies In The American Race Problem*: Doubleday, Page and Co.: 1908: p. 107.

29. Cf. Alan Lomax: *Mister Jelly Roll*: Grosset and Dunlap: New York: 1950: pp. 20-21 and Oliver: *Conversation With The Blues*: Horizon: New York: 1965: pp. 94-97.

30. Cf. Olsson's aforementioned sleeve notes.

31. The earliest such blues we are able to document is a parent version of Bo Carter's *Old Devil* (1938), which Walter Vinson heard around 1907 being performed as *Shimmy-She-Wobble* by a middle-aged Bolton guitarist, P.G. Hodges.

32. Handy: *Father Of The Blues*: Collier reprint of the 1941 edition: New York: 1970: pp. 91-92.

33. Elizabeth Moore said that the barrelhouse owner auditioned prospective performers: "You'd wanna hear how his music sounded...see if it could 'take' with the people."

Footnotes - Chapter Four

1. Vernon Lane Wharton: *The Negro In Mississippi, 1865-1890*: University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill: 1947: p. 111.

2. Stone: *Studies In The American Race Problem*: Doubleday and Company: New York: 1908: p. 121.

3. That this was a superior wage is evinced by the Southern Tenant Farmer's Union unsuccessful demand (in 1936) for a standard wage of $1.25 per hundred pounds.

4. Stone, pp. 109-110.

5. The Pattons' native Hinds County numbered 39,500 blacks in 1900, while Bolivar County, which adjoined Sunflower and was then Mississippi's greatest cotton-producing region, had 31,000.

6. Robert Sherrill: *Gothic Politics In The Deep South*: Ballantine Books: New York: 1969: pp. 203-204.

7. From the centennial edition of *The Rosedale Democrat*, June, 1936. We are indebted to Joe Rice Dockery for making the clipping available to us.

8. J.N. Darling: "The Yazoo Delta of Mississippi, and Location and Construction of its Railroads": *Journal of The Western Society of Engineers*: 1902 edition: Chicago.

9. Faulkner: *The Mansion*: Vintage edition: New York: 1955: p. 48. Recalling his days in Cleveland, Dockery wrote: "...Venison was common food on the tables then. I asked Austin Thomas, a negro who lived on the Quiver River and who traded with me, why I sold him no meat and lard, and he replied that he had sufficient bear bacon and bear lard to last him three years."

10. Cf. Darling.

11. After his death, when it passed into the hands of his son Joe Rice Dockery, the plantation was renamed *Dockery Farms*.

12. By law, private plantation holdings were limited to ten thousand acres.

13. The daily operations of the plantation fell to the assistant manager, a figure known as the "rider".

14. Phillip Bruce: *The Rise of the New South*: George Barrie and Sons: Philadelphia: 1905: p. 27.

15. In other respects, the present outlines of Sunflower County were largely drawn after *Dockery*'s was founded. Doddsville, five miles south of Ruleville,

came into being in the 1890s as a 5,000 acre plantation and Drew, six miles north of Ruleville, was incorporated in 1897. Moorhead was established a year later and Boyle, five miles south of Cleveland, in 1905.

16. Scrip was commonly used by plantations, railroads, and mining firms in order to ensure that the wages of employees were returned to them in the form of commerce. In the plantation system it also acted as a check on tenants who (it was feared) might decamp with the advances they needed to draw on their annual settlements in order to subsist.

17. V.O. Key, Jr.: *Southern Politics*: Vintage edition: New York: 1949: p. 238. Leroy Percy's son William Alexander Percy, the poet and author of *Lanterns On The Levee* (1941), was to form a close friendship with Dockery's son, as did David Cohn, the author of *God Shakes Creation.*

18. Percy: *Lanterns On The Levee*: Alfred A. Knopf: New York: 1946: p. 309.

19. The predecessor *Pea Vine,* which was the nickname of the Rosedale and Mississippi Central Railroad, ran from Rosedale to Bogue in the 1880s.

20. Stone, p. 112.

21. Emmett Scott: *Booker T. Washington, Builder Of Civilization*: Doubleday: New York: 1916: pp. 130-131. The christenings of Booker White (b. 1909) and Booker Miller (b. 1910) apparently reflected this visit.

22. Charles S. Johnson: *Growing Up In The Black Belt*: Shocken reprint: New York: 1967: p. 318.

23. Mott Willis, a central Mississippi guitarist who moved to Drew in 1919, derived a version of this song (which he termed a "rag" and played in the C position) from Patton. Cf. David Evans: *Tradition And Creativity In The Folk Blues*: unpublished PHD thesis: University of California: Los Angeles: 1976: p. 349, 368.

24. Lynd and Lynd: *Middletown: A Study In American Culture*: Harcourt, Brace and World reprint of the 1929 edition: New York: 1956: p. 251.

25. Hart: *The Southern South*: Appleton And Co.: New York: 1910: p. 117.

26. Moore attributed the song to a Tunica pastor who led his congregation in singing it: "...they wanted everybody to go in prayer."

27. Henry Bates Brown: *Cotton*: McGraw-Hill: New York: 1938: p. 380.

28. Puckett: *Folk Beliefs Of The Southern Negro*: Dover reprint of the 1926 edition: New York: 1969: p. 10.

29. According to Stone the Delta furnished seven times as many state convicts to the prison population of 1900 as the hills. While fewer than half the black hill residents then in prison had been convicted of violent felonies, three-quarters of the Delta-drawn convicts were serving time for murder, attempted murder, or manslaughter, all crimes associated with barrelhousing.

30. Hart writes: "...a stock statement, a thousand times repeated, is that there is no such thing as a virtuous negro woman." (Hart, p. 134)

31. Partridge: *A Dictionary Of Slang And Unconventional English*: Macmillan: New York: 1953. The phrase derives from the actual wedding ceremony once performed by European gypsies and peasants, and a military variant was practiced in eighteenth century England by jumping over crossed swords to the rhyme: "Leap rogue and jump whore, and then you are married for ever more."

Footnotes - Chapter Five

1. It is not known if this song, which began "If you can't Shimmy you got no business here" was actually designed for the dance of the name.

2. William Marion Reedy: *The Hot Springs Of Arkansas*: Missouri Pacific brochure, c. 1916: p. 15.

3. The date is inexact because Brown is unsure if he was born in 1891 or 1893, and dated events in terms of his age. He moved from his native Utica to Shaw at ten or twelve (i.e., in 1901-1905) and moved to Skene a year or so later, where he spent three years before coming to Cleveland. While this chronology dates his arrival in Cleveland to 1905-1910, he recalled meeting Willie Brown there at age twelve or thirteen, which would indicate that he was ten when he moved to Shaw, and came to Cleveland no later than 1907.

4. All of our information derived from Brown was generously supplied by Mr. LaVere, who located him in Memphis.

5. Miniscule resemblances between Black and Patton encourage the notion that the pair had mutual associates. Both musicians play two beat tonic chord strums and a two note riff on the top two strings (a dominant and minor third) as part of an E position accompaniment. Black's insertion of part of a bridge figure within the last two vocal beats of *Rock Island Blues* is a mannerism that Patton used on such songs as *Banty Rooster Blues*.

6. Cf. notes to *The Immortal Charlie Patton*, Origin Jazz Library 7 (1964).

7. The opening verse of *Pony Blues*, consisting of fourteen bars, consumes nearly 35 seconds, while the closing verse (of sixteen and a half bars), takes ten seconds less.

8. Sleepy John Estes learned the song from Newbern in 1913 or 1917. Newbern's recording begins with the same three note ascent (dominant-minor seventh-keynote) as *Banty Rooster*. The concluding vocal phrases of each song are dissimilar, and *Roll And Tumble* does not employ the major second of *Banty* as an interval.

9. Son House (whose work was no more thematic than Patton's) took him to task for this trait: "Charlie, he'd sing a lot of monkey-junk in a record and I didn't believe in it. Let's say you wanna make 'The Cigarette Blues'...The next few verses he'd be singin' about 'the flower'. I say 'uh, uh, that don't work'...Charlie'd put *anything* in his verses."

10. Patton repeats this phrase on *Tom Rushen* and *Hammer Blues*.

11. *The American History And Encyclopedia Of Music*: edited by W.L. Hubbard, Irving Square: New York: 1910: p. 64.

12. Handy: pp. 80-81.

13. At that time the first rail stop beneath Tutwiler was the newly-incorporated town of Moorhead, forty miles away, which was then the only point of intersection between the "Dog" and the "Southern", which ran east to west. The "Dog" itself was a new arrival to the Delta, running through undeveloped wilderness. "They tell me many years ago," Elizabeth Moore said, "when they opened it up...it was *so* muddy in here, you know, comin' down that 'Dog'...that they named it 'The Mud-Line.'" Patton and Brown applied the latter name to one of their favorite duets, Willie Moore said: "That's just what they'd say: 'Let's play *The Mud-Line*.'"

14. Helen H. Roberts: *Ancient Hawaiian Music*: Dover reprint of the 1926 edition: New York: 1967: p. 10.

15. Handy, p. 79.

16. Handy, p. 80, 81.

17. The Handy, Nash, and Williams songs appear in full in Handy: *A Treasury Of The Blues*: Charles Boni: New York: 1949: pages 93, 119, 158.

18. At the time, Moore recalled, "Handy didn't have no band...When he picked me up, he playin' for Jim Turner...It was Jim Turner's band that Handy was handlin'..." According to Moore he soon inherited the outfit upon the death of Turner, whom Handy's memoirs portray as his subordinate.

19. Cf. Palmer: *Deep Blues*: Viking Press: New York: 1981: pp. 50- 51.

20. A.B. Hart: *The Southern South*: D. Appleton: New York: 1908: p. 266.

21. Brandfon: *Cotton Kingdom Of The New South*: Harvard University Press: Cambridge: 1967: pp. 123-4.

22. Brown: *Cotton*: McGraw-Hill: New York and London: 1938: p. 345.

23. Evans: *Tradition And Creativity In The Folk Blues*: University of California: Los Angeles: unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 1976: p. 40.

24. Whereas Cleveland's Brown was even shorter than Patton, Sumner's Brown was a man of hulking proportions. Bankston indicated that he stood six feet tall and weighed in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds. Ledell Johnson, his wife Mary Johnson, and Sara Garrett all produced nearly identical physical descriptions of Brown, whom Tom Cannon described as a "pretty good size guy" who stood at least half a foot taller than Patton. Though Evans (p. 340 ff.) takes Sumner's Brown (whom he identifies as a Drew native) to be the same man who recorded with Patton, he does so on no basis other than their similarity of name.

25. For that matter, it is impossible to meaningfully segregate Drew musicians from those of adjoining Tallahatchie County; Willie Brown lived there as a tenant of the Jennings plantation, as did both "Tee-Nicey" Wade and Dick Bankston in the 1920s, when both settled in Tutwiler.

26. The song would be a typical twelve bar blues, except that three instrumental beats are cut out of the end of the first line, while the second vocal phrase is given nine beats.

27. In the first phrase of the song, Johnson disrupts this pattern by accenting the sixth beat instead of the fifth. The first piece Skip James learned, *Drunken Spree*, was a square dance that was accented according to a 1-2 pattern. Likewise, Leadbelly's Library of Congress demonstration of a square dance pattern, *Poor Howard*, was given 1-2 accenting.

28. Johnson's sequence employs a major third, dominant, minor third, and keynote; Bailey's equivalent involves a dominant, major sixth, minor third, and keynote.

Footnotes - Chapter Six

1. Cf. Mathews, *A Dictionary Of Americanisms On Historical Principles*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1951.

2. Patton's material was for the most part standard blues fare in terms of its melodies, intervals, accompaniment harmonies, and guitar keys. His most unusual melody besides *Pony Blues* was *Hammer Blues*, a six note song that used the keynote as a free melody note instead of as the lowest tone in the song (as was typical of blues). In this song it is the major third that ends the second vocal phrase that serves as the lowest tone. Patton's intervals are only unusual for their frequent augmented fourths. His harmonic treatment of chords involves a common Mississippi blues device of implying a dominant seventh by omitting its major third (and sometimes even its root), which enabled Paton to sing and play with greater melodic and rhythmic freedom. His basic guitar positions were the key of E and open A ("Spanish" tuning).

3. Thomas is thought to be the oldest black musician whose work is available on records.

4. Cf. Blind Willie Johnson's recordings of *Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed* (1927) and *You're Gonna Need Somebody On Your Bond* (1930).

5. Booker White explained: "The people wouldn't dance in the house..most the time they'd break the houses down, be so many people."

6. The "cut-in" technique was employed on a few other Mississippi blues, such as William Harris' *Kansas City Blues* (1927), Skip James' *Devil Got My Woman* (1931), and Robert Johnson's *I Believe I'll Dust My Broom* (1936).

7. It was probably this song that Miller (who could not remember its title) counted as his favorite Patton piece. "It was slow, and people didn't dance by it," Miller said of the song, which he relished so much that Patton always included it in their outings together: "He'd say: 'Well kid, I reckon I better play your piece now, and get you off my back.'"

8. Patton's only accompaniments that lack a "talking" component are *Runnin' Wild*, where he defers to a fiddler, and *High Water Everywhere, Part One*.

9. *Readings In Black American Music*: edited by Eileen Southern: W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1971, p. 81.

10. While Patton's rolls typically stand in isolation of whatever guitar figures follow them, he does a striking job of linking a roll with a follow-up riff in the second verse of *Rattlesnake Blues*. A three beat bass roll begun on the second beat of the second vocal phrase is fused with a snapped treble string on the fifth beat (a minor third—the seventh of the the implied IV chord) and bass eighth notes on the sixth beat that merge with a treble riff borrowed from *Pony Blues*.

11. The closest he comes to suggesting a guitar pattern lies in the tonic bass fills that he drops during the last vocal phrases of *Green River* and *Jim Lee*. While these are heard on every other beat (from the second to eighth) in a 1-2 pattern, Patton sometimes omits these fills.

Footnotes - Chapter Seven

1. Unlike the minstrel show, the medicine show charged no admission. Matt Dakin of Skene noted that instead of selling medicine (which was often an alcoholic "medicinal spirit") the latter would sometimes sell certificates for it that could be redeemed at a local drug store.

2. Thus recalled Matt Dakin.

3. Crewe: *The Mid-South And Its Builders*: Nashville: 1920 (no publishing imprimatur).

4. Broonzy: *Big Bill Blues*: Oak Publications: New York: 1964: pp.48-49.

5. In the 1920s "scuttle" was a pejorative term for a black person. Cf. Wentworth and Flexner: *Dictionary Of American Slang*: Thomas Y. Crowell Company: New York: 1960.

6. A chaste version of the first couplet was collected by Mary Wheeler and printed in her *Steamboatin' Days*: Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge: 1944, p. 12.

7. Bolton furnished more recorded bluesmen than any other Mississippi town.

8. Vinson's bias was shared by the lightweight localite Willie Morris, who said of Patton in 1972: "I'll tell you what made him popular: *The Crowing Rooster Blues; The Pony Blues*...They wasn't all that good, but at that time the people didn't know too much about music: music wasn't as 'classical' as it is now and it wasn't as hard to do it as it is now."

9. The *Sliding Delta* was the name of a train that ran between Greenwood and Grenada.

10. The latter term is recorded in Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*: Macmillan: New York: 1953.

11. House used the expression in his own *Dry Spell Blues* to describe the "money men" (planters) of Lula.

12. Cf. *Mississippi Blues*, Folkways LP Fa 267. Short's report that Patton was "haulin' logs" at the camp is unlikely.

13. Founded shortly after the Civil War, the plantation was acquired by L.D. McCoy, Jr. in 1968 and is still in operation.

14. Golden Kelly, *Cottondale*'s only resident of 1968 who lived there when Patton did, remembered him for his mandolin work, which he liked better than his guitar playing. There are no other reports that Patton played this instrument.

15. McCord: *The American Negro As A Dependent, Defective, and Delinquent*: Benson Printing Co.: Nashville: 1920: p. 262.

16. Evans: "Blues on Dockery's Plantation: 1895 to 1967." *Nothing But The Blues*: Ed. Mike Ledbitter: London: Hanover Books: 1971: pp. 129-132.

17. At one time, Howard said, his sister owned three snapshots of Patton, one displaying him with his arm around a girlfriend's neck. When contacted on the Beauty plantation near Forest City, Arkansas in 1972, she no longer possessed them and had no interest in discussing Patton.

18. Cf. Bernard Klatzko's notes to *The Imortal Charlie Patton*, Origin Jazz Library, Volume Seven.

Footnotes - Chapter Eight

1. For accounts of the Bell Witch, cf. Arthur Palmer Hudson: *Specimens Of Mississippi Folk-Lore*: Ann Arbor Press: 1928, and Andrew Tackaberry: *Famous Ghosts, Phantoms, and Poltergeists For The Millions*: Bell Press: New York: 1967.

2. House said of Patton, whose bottleneck technique was more skillful than his own: "...He never could use them (bottlenecks) and neither could Willie Brown...They didn't understand how to use them, because if you just take the bottleneck just like you take your naked finger, you know, and chord like that...it sound like the devil. You got to keep your hand moving (i.e., laterally, to produce a vibrato). And they never could get that hand so they could play."

3. House maintained: "He never would barely talk. He didn't talk much."

4. Cf. *Blues Unlimited* magazine, December 1970, pp. 8-9.

5. "You'll notice that Charlie Patton plays everything he play in one tunin' mostly; in 'Spanish'," McMullen said. "Little Willie didn't do that." Less than half of the thirty-two blues recordings Patton produced during the time McMullen knew him were played in "Spanish" tuning.

6. House nonsensically claimed that Brown's rhythm was more correct than Patton's: "Charlie used to 'break time' in lots of pieces...You take *High Water*...he breaks a little time if you notice it right careful...Charlie played (it) the way Willie Brown (played) *The Jinks*. But Charlie he makes two beats, then he change over right there...but Willie he keeps over to the third verse and then he change."

7. When Ernest Brown knew him, Brown played without picks.

Footnotes - Chapter Nine

1. For example, Shirley Griffith of Brandon reported that Patton played frequently in Jackson in the 1920s, and would reach the city by way of Hattiesburg. Skip James heard of Patton's appearances in his home town of Bentonia (a hill town north of Jackson) in the late 1920s.

2. *Lanterns On The Levee* (1941), p. 14.

3. *Steamboatin' Days*: Louisiana State University Press: Baton Rouge: 1944: p. 5.

4. *Kansas City Blues* was probably invented by Blind Blake, whom Booker Miller heard play it in Chicago before Jackson's record reached the market. Its unusual structure (four bar verses and an eight bar chorus, with only its four bars using a blues pattern) was identical to that of Blake's 1926 *Diddie Wa Diddie.*

5. So said Buchanon, who added that Thornton's wife was shamed by his willingness to record at all. As the record in question was listed by Columbia files as "rejected", it is more likely that Thornton's suit revolved around his previous record, issued in August, 1927.

6. Speir received this commission after each of Patton's sessions.

7. House said of it: "His'n was a little more fancy than me and Willie's (Brown's)...The neck of it was made a little different...it had little fancy coils in it..."

Footnotes - Chapter 10

1. See Wentworth and Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang.* The fact that the song was recorded before Christmas of 1934 indicates that "Thirty-four" is a figurative expression.

2. Since finding Patton, Speir had sent Paramount the team of Blind Roosevelt and Uaroy Graves, whom he found in a church in McComb, a town that normally "wasn't any good" for talent. A native of Rose Hill, Graves toured Delta towns like Helena and Greenwood and once mentioned meeting Patton to a traveling companion.

3. Three masters from this session remain untraced. The date of the session is uncertain. Whereas Dixon and Godrich's discography dates it to late November or early December of 1929, Sims' sister Roberta Jameson distinctly recalled it as occurring in the spring of 1930. It was Laibly's policy to have Grafton artists record three takes of each potentially issuable song. He would then review the takes with a recording engineer (Walter Klopp) and decide which of the three to issue. In 1985, unissued takes of three Patton songs (*Elder Green*, *Hammer*, and *Some Of These Days*) were recovered from the attic of a Waukegan, Illinois house that was probably once occupied by Laibly or Klopp. They remain in the hands of a private collector.

4. Two sisters, Roberta Jameson and Nellie Hester, were still living in Memphis in 1970.

5. Their longest separation lasted two years in the mid-Twenties, which Sims passed with Thomas on *Wall's* plantation near Farrell, and ended when his wife appeared at his doorstep to return his clothes.

6. This style involved two bass strokes on the first beat of each measure, an accented bass stroke on the second beat, three treble strums on the third beat, and an accented bass stroke on the fourth beat.

7. For this song Patton played "just most anything what fits, you know," House said. "Something like *Shake It And Break It*...The guys (in the audience) they didn't know no better nohow; they didn't care — they'se interested in the words."

8. See Farmer & Hanley, *Slang and its Analogues*. In the 17th-18th centuries "green-apron" was a slang term for a lay preacher.

9. Although the phrase-ending vocal extensions of *Rattlesnake* involve relatively short holds of two or four beats, its guitar phrasing is identical with that of the title verse of *Pony Blues*, except for the omission of half-bar strums from each phrase. The accompaniment takes a repeating pattern of 12 1/2 bar verses (set forth in a 10-6, 10-6, 10-8 pattern) until the final verse. Its divergence from the *Pony Blues* title verse accompaniment for the most part consists of IV^7 rolls on the second phrase.

10. Even in these song sketches, Patton's singularity is manifest in off-beat touches he gratuitiously added to his material. Damping and percussive guitar

tapping mark *Mean Black Cat*, primarily a vehicle for lyrics; unorthodox damped tonic bass slides herald the end of each vocal phrase of *Devil Sent The Rain*, which had an affecting contrast between a torpid tempo and a turbulent vocal delivery. In *Joe Kirby* he simultaneously snapped and damped a sixth beat bass fill.

Footnotes - Chapter Eleven

1. Percy: *Lanterns On The Levee*: Knopf: 1941: p. 249.

2. The flood itself was brought on by three weeks of steady rainfall, after eight months of abnormally frequent rain had swollen the Mississippi and softened its dirt levees.

3. Apparently this phrase (which Booker Miller deciphered) refers to an Indian burial mound.

4. Percy (p. 258) wrote: "...the dispersal of our labor was a longer evil to the Delta than a flood."

5. The meaning of "skid" is obscure. Patton may refer to a skid-road, i.e., a plank road upon which logs were hauled.

6. Will Dockery owned a plantation in Marion City, and Patton's familiarity with the area is indicated by his reference to a Marion whistle in *Green River Blues*.

7. Ice boats were used for rescue purposes during the flood, and Patton is apparently referring to one here.

8. *The New York Times*: April 21, 1927: p. 5.

9. Harris Warren: *Herbert Hoover And The Great Depression*: Norton and Co.: New York: 1967: pp. 178-9.

Footnotes - Chapter Twelve

1. The musician who worked this routine was known as a "sweet back papa" and his girlfriend, a "sweet mama". See Alan Lomax: *Mister Jelly Roll*: Grosset and Dunlap: New York: 1950: pp. 19-20 and Broonzy: *Big Bill Blues*: Oak

Publications: New York: 1964: pp. 48-9. Ray Stannard Baker noted a "gal in the white folks' yard" verse (not a blues) in 1908, and wrote: "A woman who works as a cook in a white family will often take enough from the kitchen to feed a worthless vagabond..." Cf. *Following The Color Line*: Harper Torchbooks reprint: New York: 1964: pp. 60-61.

2. House's failure to perform with Patton would explain the fact that he learned all of his versions of Patton pieces from Willie Brown after parting company with Patton. It would also explain his general unfamiliarity with the finer points of Patton's music.

3. These consisted of excerpts from editorials of the April 12th and April 19th editions of the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*. Laibly had the company press a hundred copies of each monologue, and gave them to Speir free of charge.

4. One of these sides, *Walking Blues*, was an unissued duet with Brown.

Footnotes - Chapter Thirteen

1. So reports Willie Moore, who accompanied him in Robinsonville around 1929.

2. Letter to Calt, July 23, 1970.

4. Resident Morgan City bluesmen of the period included an aging D. Irvin, who arrived there in 1933 by way of Itta Bena and later settled in Quito; Bo Weavil Jackson (a different man from the Paramount blues artist), who worked as a log hauler on the nearby Mayday plantation and taught Booker Miller *Shake 'Em On Down* in 1932, and a string band consisting of Stuckey, guitarist Arthur Casey, mandolinist Walter Howard, and a violinist, "Old Man" Johnnie Adams. "All them mens was *old* men back in them days," Miller said of Stuckey's colleagues.

5. B. B. King (b. 1925) spent the first five years of his life in the vicinity of Heathman, as did a less successful postwar bluesman, Charlie Booker, who reports that his associate Boyd Gilmore frequently listened to Patton records and taught him *No Special Rider*, the tonic riff of which imitates a guitar figure from Patton's *Green River Blues*.

6. None of the singers who recorded renditions of Patton's tunes borrowed his mannerism of drawing out the last word of a phrase, which considerably

impressed Sleepy John Estes when the latter heard Patton on Beale Street in 1930.

7. Baptist Town, the mid-1930s home of Tommy McClennan, was a black neighborhood in north Greenwood.

Footnotes - Chapter Fourteen

1. Calaway's most recent find, an artist billed as "Tallahassee Tight", had begun a recent ARC session with a song called *I Had A Dream Last Night.* Patton's audition records for Speir included *I Had A Dream Last Night Troubled Me,* and it is possible that this record was furnished by Calaway to his own discovery.

2. It will be recalled that Speir "didn't think much" of the women singers Patton auditioned for him.

3. So she stated in a 1964 interview with record collector Bernard Klatzko. Other information relating to Patton's activity in New York was supplied by Don Kent.

4. Jay Martin: *Nathanael West: The Art Of His Life*: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux: New York: 1970: p. 276.

5. This information was provided by Kip Lornell.

6. In addition, he recorded three sides as Bertha Lee's accompanist.

7. Cf. *Julius Caeser,* Act IV, Scene III.

Epilogue Footnotes

1. Reverend A.W. Nix: *That Little Thing May Kill You Yet* (1929).

2. Harrison, Adams, Beeson, Resnik, Thorn, and Wintrobe: *Principles Of Internal Medicine:* McGraw-Hill Book Company: New York: 1954: p. 876.

3. Cf. Herskovits: *The Myth of The Negro Past*: Beacon Press edition: p. 205. The author relates this belief to West African religion.

Sources

With one or two incidental exceptions, all quotations appearing in this study were drawn from tape recorded interviews made between 1965 and 1972. Important informants were interviewed on several occasions. In most instances, questions concerning Patton were asked in the course of an interview covering a number of musical subjects. Except in the case of Joe Rice Dockery, no informant was told that the interviewer was writing a study of Charlie Patton. Furthermore, in no instance did the interviewer express an opinion as to the merits of Patton's music or personality. The material gathered, therefore, accurately reflects the predilections and biases of the interviewees, rather than those of the researchers.

The following persons were interviewed by Stephen Calt: Sam Chatmon (New York, 1972), Shirley Griffith (Indianapolis, 1971), David Edwards (Vienna, Virginia, 1971), Richard Harney (Palisades, N.Y. 1971), Son House (New York, 1965, 1966, with the assistance of Nick Perls), Willie Morris (Vienna, Virginia, 1971), Skip James (Philadelphia and Palisades, N.Y., 1965-1969), Eugene Powell (Vienna, Virginia, 1971), Yank Rachel (Indianapolis, 1971), Walter Vinson (Washington, 1972), J. Mayo Williams (Chicago, 1971), Booker White (New York, 1965).

The following persons were interviewed by Gayle Wardlow: Bunk Ashford (Skene, 1970), Henry Austin (Sumner, 1968), Lilly Berry (Sumner, 1968), Nathan Bankston (Memphis, 1967), Reverend James Buchanon (Moorhead, 1972), Ishmon Bracey (Jackson, 1969), Joe Callicott (Hernando, 1969), Harry Charles (Birmingham, 1968-1970), Larry Chatmon (Bolton, 1970), Jack Cooper (Terry, 1967), Nellie Hester (Memphis, 1969-1970), Lonnie Hodges (Leland, 1970), Frank Howard (Tribbet, 1967), Roberta Jameson (Memphis, 1969-1970), Ledell and Mary Johnson (Jackson, 1967), Flora Bates Kimball (Sumner, 1968), Hayes McMullen (Sumner, 1967-1971), Booker Miller (Greenwood, 1968-1969), Earl Montgomery (Memphis, 1970), Elizabeth and Willie Moore (Sumner, 1967-1971), Alfred Schultz (Grafton, Wisc., 1969), Mrs. Paul Sauers (widow of Ralph Lembo) (Itta Bena, 1969), H.C. Speir (Skyway Hills, 1966-1970), Percy Thomas (Clarksdale, 1968), Mandy Whigam (Moorhead, 1972), Josie Chatmon Whigham

(Jackson, 1969), Leroy Willis (Helena, Ark., 1968), Willie (Have Mercy) Young (Leland, 1967). In some instances questions for these informants were provided by Calt.

The following persons were jointly interviewed by Calt and Wardlow: Tom Cannon (Dockery, 1970), Harry Charles (Birmingham, 1970), Matt Dakin (Pace, 1970), Joe Rice Dockery (Dockery, 1970), Sara Garrett (Dockery, 1970), Elizabeth and Willie Moore (Sumner, 1970), Hayes McMullen (Sumner, 1970).

Material from Arthur Laibly was provided by John Steiner (who interviewed him with questions supplied by Wardlow in Park Ridge, Ill., 1967); additional material was provided by Laibly in correspondence with Calt. Material from Ernest Brown was provided by Steve LaVere, who interviewed him in Memphis around 1972.

Discography

Reissues of Patton Material

Charlie Patton/Founder of the Delta Blues Yazoo 1020
This two volume-set, originally released in 1969, contains most of Patton's front-line material, along with lyrics to his songs.

Charlie Patton/The Last Legacy Yazoo 1075
This album contains recently discovered Patton material, including unissued takes of three titles.

Patton, Sims and Bertha Lee Herwin 213
This album contains additional Patton recordings, all of Henry Sims' commercial recordings, and Patton's recordings with Bertha Lee.

Library, Vol. 7
The Immortal Charlie Patton Origin Jazz
This album, originally issued in 1964, Library, Vol. 7 has been superseded by Yazoo's reissues.

Library, Vol. 1
Charlie Patton And The Country Blues Origin Jazz
This album, the first full-length Library, Vol. 1 ressissue of Patton's music, appeared around 1962. It is marred by poor sound quality.

Additional Patton titles available on various LPs:

Devil Sent The Rain Blues Yazoo 1009
Hang It On The Wall Yazoo 1001
Heart Like Railroad Steel Herwin 201
Jersey Bull Blues Mamlish 3802
Mean Black Moan Yazoo 1001
Prayer Of Death (Parts 1 and 2) Yazoo 1022

Square Dance Songs, "Rag" Ditties and Early Blues

Drunken Spree (Skip James) Yazoo 1072
I'm Alabama Bound (Papa Charlie Jackson) Yazoo 1029
I Will Turn Your Money Green (Furry Lewis) Yazoo 1050
Old Devil (Bo Carter) Yazoo 1007
Mister Crump Don't 'Low It (Frank Stokes) Yazoo 1056
Poor Boy Long Ways From Home (Gus Cannon) Yazoo 1002
That's No Way To Get Along (Robert Wilkins) Yazoo 1063

Tunes Patton Recorded

Booze An' Blues (Ma Rainey) Yazoo 1071
Sittin' On Top Of The World Yazoo 1074
(Mississippi Sheiks)

Versions of Patton Material

Bye Bye Blues (Tommy Johnson) Yazoo 1007
Down The Big Road Blues (Mattie Delaney) Yazoo 1009
Future Blues (Willie Brown) Yazoo 1076
Long Ways From Home (Louise Johnson) Origin Jazz Library, Vol. 7
Maggie Campbell Blues (Tommy Johnson) Yazoo 1076
M&O Blues (Willie Brown) Yazoo 1076
Pony Blues (David Edwards)
Rowdy Blues (Kid Bailey) Yazoo 1076

Related Material

"Down On Stovall's Plantation" Testament T-2210
(Henry Sims' Library Of Congress Recordings)

Evil Howlin' Wolf (early recordings) Chess 1540

"King of The Delta Blues", Vol. I and II Columbia CL 1654, C30034 (Robert Johnson)

Little Girl In Rome (Otto Virgial) Mamlish 3802

Appendix One
Patton Chronology

1891 (April)	Charlie Patton born, apparently on *Heron's Place*, between Bolton and Edwards Depot.
c. 1895	The Pattons move to or near Edwards Depot.
c. 1900	The Pattons move to Dockery's plantation in Sunflower County.
c. 1905	Patton takes up with banjoist Roxie Gibson, whom he meets at Lula.
c. 1905/1907	Patton learns *You Take My Woman* and *Maggie*, and obtains guitar pointers from Earl Harris of Cleveland.
c. 1907	Patton sits for a portrait while living in Yallobusha County with Lizzie Taylor.
c. 1907	Patton becomes Mississippi's first blues singer of consequence.
1908	Patton lives with Millie Barnes on *Dockery's*, and fathers a daughter, Willie Mae.
1910	Patton's repertoire includes *Pony Blues, Banty Rooster Blues, Down The Dirt Road,* and *Mississippi Bo Weavil.*
1910/1911	Dick Bankston of Drew imitates *Pony Blues*, Patton's signature song.
c. 1914	Patton gives pointers to Willie Brown of Cleveland and is imitated by Tommy Johnson of Terry.
1914/1915	Strife with a brother leads Patton to leave *Dockery's* and board with the Chatmons at the *Gaddis and McLaurin* plantation near Bolton. He then moves to Smedes and Kelso.
1916	Patton is known as a resident of Hollandale.
c. 1916	Patton is offered a slot in W. C. Handy's band.
c. 1918	Patton returns to *Dockery's* and fails an army physical, probably because of a heart murmur.

1921	(December) Patton is banished from *Dockery's* and takes up residence at *Cottondale*, between Ruleville and Minter City.
1922	July 4th: Patton marries Mandy France on Oss Pepper's plantation between Ruleville and Minter City.
1923	(spring) Banished from *Cottondale*, Patton makes an abortive attempt to return to *Dockery's* and is reportedly critically wounded at a barrelhouse in Helena, Arkansas.
1924	Patton is back on *Dockery's*. He "marries" Minnie Franklin of Merigold, who reportedly robs him of $900 and a pistol.
c. 1926	Willie Brown becomes noted as Patton's duet partner. Patton also works in a string ensemble with John Nance, James Hardy, and Kid Bailey, all of Sunflower County.
c. 1927	Patton turns down a recording proposal ventured by Ralph Lembo of Itta Bena.
c. 1928/1929	Patton makes up *Tom Rushing* in response to being arrested by the sheriff of Merigold.
1929	(spring) H.C. Speir auditions Patton on *Dockery's* after receiving his letter of self-recommendation.
	June 14th: Patton records 14 titles for Paramount Records at Richmond, Indiana.
	(summer?) Speir pays additional visits to *Dockery's* for the pleasure of listening to Patton perform.
	(fall?) Patton is banished from *Dockery's* after leaving the plantation with a married tenant, Katie Williams.
	(winter) Patton takes up quarters on the *Anderson* plantation near Cleveland and lives in Pace (as well as, it seems, Skene). He joins a minstrel show from Nashville.
	(winter) Booker Miller of Swiftown meets Patton in Ruleville and becomes his protege.
	(winter - spring 1930) H.C. Speir tracks Patton to *Jefferies*, and consents to his request to record with Henry Sims of Farrell.
	(winter - spring 1930) Patton records at least 24 titles for Paramount at Grafton over a two day period, and then travels with Sims to Detroit.
1930	(spring) Patton lives with Bertha Lee Jones near Lula, where he meets Son House.

	Patton takes the Delta Big Four (a Lula gospel quartet) to Jackson to audition for Speir.
	(April-May) Patton enlists his girlfriend Louise Johnson of Robinsonville, Willie Brown, and Son House for Paramount, and records at least four titles at Grafton.
	(summer) Patton and Bertha Lee live in Robinsonville for some two months.
	(fall?) Patton and Bertha Lee take up residence at Holly Ridge, Longswitch, and Heathman in Sunflower County.
c. 1931	Patton is imitated by Robert Johnson and Howlin' Wolf.
1932	Patton's final Paramount recording is released shortly before the company goes out of business.
c. 1932	Patton formally marries an overseer's daughter in Morgan City.
1933	Patton is almost killed when his throat is slit at a house "frolic" near Holly Ridge.
	Around December, Patton visits Jackson with Willie Brown and Son House to make audition records for Speir.
1934	January: Patton is freed from the Belzoni jail by W. R. Calaway of the American Record Company.
	January 30th - February lst: Patton records 26 titles for ARC in New York.
	(April) Near Greenwood, Patton flaunts a new common-law wife named Willie.
	April 28: Patton dies of heart failure on the *Heathman-Dedham* plantation.

Appendix Two

A Glossary Of Song Expressions

Patton's songs are heavily dependent on dated colloquialisms and what Willie Moore termed "barrelhouse words" — low black slang of the sort used by barrelhouse patrons. The definitions that follow were arrived at from informants, literary works, and dictionaries cited by abbreviation. The latter are listed at the end of this section.

as long as (one's arm): An' my bull's got a horn baby, long as my arm
(*Jersey Bull Blues:* 1934)

Very long; a colloquialism dating to the late 19th century (Partridge).

association (n): Elder Greene told the deacon:
"Let's go down in prayer.
There's a big 'ssociation in New Orleans
Come and let's go there."
(*Elder Greene Blues: 1929)*

An archaic colloquialism for a convention of clergymen. The term was first noted in 1829 in the *Virginia Literary Museum* and *Journal of Belles Lettres* (quoted in Mathews), when it was attributed to New England. It occurs in the 19th century spiritual *I'm Gwine to Join De Great 'Ssociation (*R.N. Dett: *Religious Folksongs of the Negro).*

ball (v): Ball on baby, you can have your way
(*Hammer Blues:* 1929)

To carouse; probably from the use of *ball* as a term for a dance. Although treated as a "jive term" of the 1930s by the DAS, it is of older, apparently rural derivation.

bedmaker (n): He's a dying bedmaker
Jesus gonna make up my dying (bed).
(*Jesus Is A Dying-Bed Maker*: 1929)

An obsolete standard English term for one who builds or "makes" beds, used in Thackary's *Henry Esmond* (1852): "'...never see a woman that's handsomer than an old cider-faced bedmaker."

bird nest on the ground: I know where there's a bird nest, built down on the ground.
(*Bird Nest Bound:* 1930)

Probably a dated Southern superlative; used in speech of sportscaster Dizzy Dean. As such, the term would derive from the use of *bird* to mean anything commendable, which became passee around 1910 (DAS).

bold (adv.): She got a man on her man, got a kid on her kid, baby
She done got so bold, Lord she won't keep it hid.
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

Brazen; probably from such figures of speech as *bold as brass* (F&H), meaning impudent, or *bold-faced* (OED).

Bottle an' Bond: Lord an' get sloppy drunk offa Bottle an' Bond and walk the streets all night.
(*Elder Greene Blues*: 1929)

A solecism for "Bottled in Bond".

bred and born: A-Louisiana leavin' Texas leavin' where I'se bred an' born, Lordie!
(*Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues*: 1929)

An inversion of "born and bred", a cliched figure of speech that came into vogue around 1870 (DC). The inverted form was idiomatic in black speech; it appears in *Uncle Remus* (1881): "'Bred an bawn in a brier patch, Brer Fox.'" and in the reminiscences of Thomas Jefferson's ex-slave Israel Jefferson (1873: quoted by Brodie): "...within four miles of Monticello, where he was bred and born..."

brown (n): Me an' my brown; when the sun goes down.
(*Shake It And Break It*: 1929)

Though a stock blues designation for a brownskin woman, this term (and the related brownie") had no known currency in black speech, save a recorded

allusion by New Orleans prostitute: "'All them sailors wanted a brownie. High yellows fared poorly...'" (Louisiana Writers Project of the WPA: *Gumbo Ya Ya*: 1945; speaker a 52-year old woman).

'buke (v): "You 'buked me an' you cursed me, oh baby all the day."
(*Frankie And Albert*: 1929)

To rebuke.

boozey: It take boozey booze, Lord to cure these blues.
(*Tom Rushen Blues*: 1929)

An adjective meaning "drunken" (F&H); regarded as obsolete by 1900 (DAS).

bull (n): "An' my bull's in a pasture, where there ain't no grass."
(*Jersey Bull Blues*: 1934)

As slang for boyfriend, this term has no known history in speech. It was probably formed by analogy with *heifer* (q.v.) or *cow*, which dates to the 17th century as a figurative term for a woman. (F&H)

bullcow (n): I got a kid on the wheeler, got a bullcow on the plough
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part I*: 1929)

See *bull*.

burying ground (n): Followed sweet mama, to the buryin' ground.
(*Devil Sent The Rain Blues:* 1929)

A colloquial variant of *burial ground* dating to the 18th century (OED).

by and by: By and by sweet mama, by and by.
(*Poor Me*: 1934)

Presently; standard English since the 1700s (Partridge).

central (n): "Hello central, the matter with your line?"
(*Pony Blues*: 1929)

The original word for telephone operator. The expression "Hello, central" was once a stock phrase of telephone dialogue, as in Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* (1889): "I used to wake...and say Hello, Central!' just to hear the dear voice.."

(quoted in DAE). Its popularity in blues couplets probably arose from the 1901 Tin Pan Alley hit, *Hello Central, Give Me Heaven.*

cheap (adj.): Oh Albert's sittin' on some cheap gal's lap Buyin' some cheap gal beer."
(*Frankie And Albert*: 1929)

A dated pejorative applied to promiscuous women (DAS), probably formed by extension of the standard English sense of cheap as worthless or common, a sense that survives in the expression "cheap shot".

come (v): 'Fore I would come to know the day, Lord, the Lula well was gone dry.
(*Dry Well Blues*: 1930)

Happen; though regarded as standard English (OED), this meaning is obsolete.

cooling board (n): Well when I curl up in my dying bed, I want my friends to be bold
It's all I ask you to do for me, come an' lay me on the coolin' board.
(*Jesus Is A Dying Bed-Maker*: 1929)

An obsolete colloquialism for a board on which a corpse was laid out prior to a funeral. The term reflects burial customs of the 19th century prior to the rise of funeral parlors, when funerals were preceded by wakes held in the home of the deceased, who was placed on view there. The practice of packing corpses in ice for such wakes probably gave rise to the expression, which was first recorded in 1855 (DAE). Although cooling boards were once commercially manufactured, the term was of limited circulation; Chapin (c. 1902) notes it as "a ghastly name given in Pennsylvania and Maryland to the board or slab upon which a dead body is laid out."

cook one's supper: I believe sweet mama would do like she says, baby
She was gonna cook my supper, Lord put me in her bed.
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

This expression may be used in its slang sense of providing sex, registered in the phrase "give the old man his supper" (F&H).

coon (n): When I get arrested, what do you reckon was my fine?

They give all coons eleven twenty nine.
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part One*: 1929)

A derogatory term for a black that arose in the 1890s, probably through the "coon song" genre, which began with Paul Allen's *New Coon In Town* (1888). By 1902 Chapin reported it as "a common term for a negro". The word probably arose from the earlier (1860) use of the same term as meaning "a sly, knowing fellow" (OED). Outside of black "coon" songs, this term had no known currency in black songs.

Coon (v): Studyin' about my woman could hardly coon my hand.
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part Two*: 1929)

An obscure allusion to playing *Coon Can*, possibly meaning to "get out" (see below).

Coon Can (n): I was sittin' down, playin' Coon Can
I lose all my money but one lil' lousey dime.
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part Two*: 1929)

A black barrelhouse card game involving two players, each of whom was dealt ten cards. The object of the game was to "get out", i.e., dispose of one's hand by forming combinations of cards. Permissable combinations included a straight flush of ten cards, two four of a kind, and one two of a kind, as well as straights of three or more cards in the same suit. Combinations were laid face up and could be completed by cards drawn from the remaining deck. After drawing a card the player discarded one of his own; his opponent could use any discarded card for his own combinations or could "hit" his opponent with matching cards, which entitled the player to dispose of another card. The first player to dispose of his entire hand won the game. If both players failed to "get out" after going through the deck, the outcome was called a "tab", in which event the game would continue, with the stakes doubled. The derivation of the term *Coon Can* is obscure; the suffix might have come from a 19th century American slang term for dollar, *can* (F&H).

cut (v): I throw a five pound axe an' I cut two different way
An' I cut for the women, both night an' day.
(*Jersey Bull Blues*: 1934)

As a slang term meaning to coit, *cut* dates to the early 1900s (S&E).

dog (v): Says 'fore I'll stand your doggin' I'll sleep in a hollow log.
(*Joe Kirby*: 1929)

A stock blues idiom for general maltreatment. It was likely derived from the cliche, "to treat one like a dog".

Dog (n): I'm goin' where the Southern cross the Dog.
(*Green River Blues*: 1929)

Colloquial for the Yazoo & Mississippi Valley Railroad (Y&MV).

donnay (n): A donnay loves saltwater, she always wants a drink.
(*Revenue Man Blues*: 1934)

According to Son House, a "no-good woman". As a slang term for a woman, "donnay" dated to the 1850s and was an uncommon variant of "donah" or "doner", all terms derived from the Spanish or French term for lady (Partridge).

don't put your hand on me: Oh but a jet-black woman, don't put your hand on me.
(*Pony Blues*: 1929)

A Southern catchphrase meaning: "hands off". It appears in Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) as a character rebuffs her drunken husband: "'Don't put your hand on me,' she said."

drop in(to) town: I throw a five pound axe an' I just dropped in your town.
(*Jersey Bull Blues*: 1934)

An obsolete figure of speech occurring in *Tom Sawyer (1876)*: "'keep a look-out for Injun Joe, because he said he was going to drop into town and spy around once more for a chance to get his revenge.'"

dying bed (n): (see *cooling board)*

A 19th century colloquialism for death bed that is mentioned in the correspondence of Emerson's aunt ("...the prospect of a dying bed reflects lustre on all the rest") and in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (when the dying Uncle Tom says: "Jesus can make a dying-bed/Feel soft as downy pillows are"). The image of Jesus as a dying-bed "maker" stems from Psalm 41:3: "The Lord will strengthen him upon the bed of languishing: though wilt make all his bed in his sickness."

eagle (n): Eagle been here, built a nest an' gone.
(*Circle Round The Moon*: 1929)

A once standard term for a ten dollar gold piece.

ease (v): I didn't know I loved her, till they eased her down.
(*Devil Sent The Rain Blues*: 1929)

A colloquialism meaning to move gently, dating to 1870 (DAE).

eleven twenty-nine: They give all coons eleven twenty-nine.
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part One*: 1929)

Obsolete slang for a jail sentence of eleven months and twenty-nine days.

evenin': How long baby that evenin' train been gone?
(*Green River Blues*: 1929)

A dated Southern colloquialism for late afternoon.

every dog has his day: Ball on baby, you can have your way
Each an' every dog, sure must have his day.
(*Hammer Blues*: 1929)

A proverb dating to the 17th century and appearing in Hamlet ("The cat will mew and the dog will have his day"). As a proverb it was first collected in Ray's *Compleat Collection of English Proverbs* (1670) as: "Every dog hath its day and every man his hour."

evil (adj.): These evil women, sure make me tired
Got a handfulla 'Gimme' mouthfulla 'Much obliged'
(*Going To Move To Alabama*: 1929)

Spiteful; an archaic standard English sense of the word that survived in early twentieth century black speech.

fairo (n): I love my fairo, tell the world I do
(*Magnolia Blues*: 1929)

A common term in Mississippi blues that "just means a woman," Willie Moore said. It may have originated in "fair roebuck", an eighteenth century expression for a woman in the bloom of her beauty (Partridge).

feed (v): If you've got a good bullcow you oughta, feed your cow good at home.
(*Jersey Bull Blues*: 1934)

As a sexual allusion, this figure of speech occurs in Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors: "...too unruly deer, he breaks the pale/and feeds from home..."(SB)*

fine (n): When I got arrested, what do you reckon was my fine?
They give all coons eleven twenty-nine.
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part One*: 1929)

Punishment or prison term; archaic criminal slang dating to the 18th century (F&H).

fix (v): Lord that jelly you're fixin' to strut will make a monkey man leave this town.
(*Love My Stuff*: 1934)

Arrange, prepare; a colloquialism first recorded in 1829 (Mathews).

'fore day: What you want with a rooster? He won't crow 'fore day.
(*Banty Rooster Blues*: 1929)

An obsolete colloquialism for the period of day immediately before sunrise (Clapin c. 1902), deriving from the once-standard English expression *afore day* (before daybreak).

'fore day prayer: I take my daily
Daily 'fore day prayer.
(*When Your Way Gets Dark*: 1929)

A black Fundamentalist term for a prayer said upon rising, called a *morning prayer* in white Biblical rhetoric. Biblical authority for the custom rests upon the apostles' utterance in tongues in "the third hour of the day" (Acts 2).

fuss an' fight: I love to fuss an' fight
(*Elder Greene Blues*: 1929)

To quarrel. The term was probably once a black colloquialism.

glory: I'm on my way to glory
(*Lord I'm Discouraged*: 1929)

Heaven; found in the slang expression, "go to glory" (to die) (Partridge).

going home: Goin' home, goin' home, goin' home
I will meet you on that other shore.
(*I'm Going Home*: 1929)

Dying, with the implication that one is going to heaven. The phrase is used in Emerson's 19th century poem *Good-Bye*: "Good-bye, proud world! I'm going home." Partridge cites "going (h)ome" as a lower class English expression for dying recorded by 1909.

Good Book: 'Cause that Good Book tells us you've got to reap just what you sow.
(*Pea Vine Blues*: 1929)

The Bible; a dated colloquialism used with the implication that there are no other good books.

good provider: I have been a good provider, but I believe I have been misled.
(*Revenue Man Blues*: 1929)

A dated colloquialism for a husband whose family is free from want, thanks to his efforts as a breadwinner. It appears in a turn of the century scene from Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel* (1929): "...he could not bear to be thought incapable of the support of his family — one of his most frequent boasts was that he was 'a good provider.'"

hat, to have (one's) in (one's) hand: Got up this mornin', my hat in my hand
(*Going To Move To Alabama*: 1929)

To be obsequious; a nineteenth century cliched figure of speech (DC).

heifer (n): There may come along a young heifer an' just tow your bull from home.
(*Jersey Bull Blues*: 1934)

A colloquialism for a girl or woman dating to about 1830 (DAS); as a term for a young female, it was still current in criminal slang of 1920 (STY).

hid (v): She done got so bold, Lord she won't keep it hid.
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

Obsolete standard English for hidden; its presence in songs is probably a result of its occurrence in the Bible: "..he arose...and entered into an house, and would have no man know it: but he could not be hid." (Mark 8:24)

high sheriff: "High sheriff ain't purty"
(*Revenue Man Blues*: 1934)

In Southern speech, an elected sheriff.

hill (n): Bo weavil says his wife: "We can sit down on the hill, Lordie."
(*Mississippi Bo Weavil Blues*: 1929)

A farm term (usually pluralized) for the ridge on which a cotton plant is grown.

hitch up: Hitch up my pony, saddle up my black mare
(Pony Blues: 1929)

To fasten horses; an old-fashioned colloquialism dating to 1857 (Tucker).

horn (n): An' my bull's got a horn baby, long as my right arm.
(*Jersey Bull Blues*: 1934)

A dated expression for penis (F&H). It is uncertain that Patton consciously intended to use a slang idiom.

house (n): They'se a house over yonder, painted all over green.
(*Moon Going Down*: 1930)

A jukehouse or whorehouse. In the latter sense, the word dates to 1865 (DAE).

Well Frankie went to Albert's house
"How late Albert been here?"
(*Frankie And Albert*: 1929)

Judging from the context of the song, a jukehouse or gambling house. As a term for gambling house, it dates to 1901 (DAE).

jack (adj.): It's a mean jack cat, Lordie, crawlin' on my door
(*Mean Black Cat Blues*: 1929)

A derogatory term for Negro (S&E).

jelly, jelly roll (n): My jelly; my roll; sweet mama don't you let it fall.
(*Shake It And Break It*: 1929)

Conventional blues idioms for genitals. As a term for semen, "jelly" dates to the seventeenth century (F&H); the like term "jelly-bag" was later applied to vagina (F&H).

jet-black: Oh but a jet-black woman, don't put your hand on me.
(*Pony Blues*: 1929)

Glossy black; a proverbial 19th century description of color (DAP).

jinks (n) If I woke up in the mornin, jinks all 'round your bed.
(*Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*: 1929)

A synonym of "hoodoo" or "bad luck" dating to around 1910 (STY).

kid (n): "I got a kid on the wheeler, got a bullcow on the plough"
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part One*: 1929)

An obscure, obsolete black slang term for boyfriend, with the probable implication that the boyfriend is secondary. Both of Patton's song references to this term involve women who have other boyfriends. It may have arisen from the pop song, *I Love My Wife, But Oh, You Kid!*

kind (adv.): I believe sweet mama sure was kind to me, baby
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

In barrelhouse parlance, generous towards a gigolo; said of women.

knocked out: If he hollers you don't stop you will likely be knocked out.
(*Revenue Man Blues*: 1934)

Arrested (DAUL). "Knock"is still in vogue among black street criminals: "'People think they ain't going to get paid, nine out of ten times, they get knocked' — arrested." (*New York Magazine*: 6/3/85).

lawyer: Yes I got a lawyer to go my bond
(*You're Gonna Need Somebody When You Die*: 1929)

An archaic gospel reference to Jesus. One of America's earliest poets, Edward Taylor (a minister in the Massachusetts Bay Colony), depicted Christ as a lawyer in "Meditation Thirty Eight," written in the late 1600s:

My Case is bad. Lord, be my Advocate.
My sin is red: I'me under Gods Arrest.
Thou has the Hit of Pleading; plead my state.

like murder: Every day, seems like murder here
I'm gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don't bid my care.
(*Down The Dirt Road*: 1929)

A variant of the catchphrase "it's murder!", which dated to about 1910 (DACP).

make (one) tired: Some of these here women sure make me tired
Got a handfulla "Gimme" mouthfulla "Much obliged."
(*Going To Move To Alabama*: 1929)

A late nineteenth century catchphrase meaning to bore or aggravate, usually found in the form "You make me tired" (Partridge).

mamlish (adj.): Just like a rattlesnake I stay, in a mamlish curl.
(*Rattlesnake Blues*: 1929)

An obscure term which had uncertain currency beyond its occurrence in blues songs of the 1920s, when it was a vogue word. One St. Louis informant reports that the word meant "evil" and "no good."

money swing: The Lord sent the sunshine, devil he sent the rain
I'm liable to be there tomorrow, on a money swing.
(*Devil Sent The Rain Blues*: 1929)

A term of unknown meaning.

monkey (n): Says I'll be your monkey baby, sure won't be your dog.
(*Joe Kirby*: 1929)

Short for "monkey man", a dated black slang term for a man who is the dupe of a woman. This term probably arose from "monkey", to behave effusively towards a pretty girl, which appeared before 1890 and was obsolete by the early 20th century (STY).

much obliged: (see *make one tired)*

A Southern colloquialism meaning "thanks".

nappy (adj.): An' she lay her nappy head in mine.
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part One*: 1929)

Kinky; a colloquial designation for the hair of blacks. From the English dialect sense of the term as "soft" (Davies)

nappy (adv.): I'm gonna leave here nappy, 'fore it be too late.
(*Love My Stuff*: 1934)

Fast; see chapter fourteen.

on: She got a man on her man, got a kid on her kid, baby
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

In addition to; a dated standard English intensifier used in such phrases as "Ill-luck on ill-luck" (OED). It is used in the above couplet to suggest innumerable lovers.

other shore: Fare thee well, fare thee well, fare thee well
I will meet you on that other shore
(I'm Going Home: 1929)

Heaven; a proverbial metaphor used in an 1842 quatrain by John Gibson Lockhart: "It is an old belief/that on some solemn shore/Beyond the sphere of grief/Dear friends shall meet once more."

panther squall (to make a): I got a woman she long an' tall
The way she's (weepin') she makes a panther squall.
(*Going To Move To Alabama*: 1929)

An inappropriate blues catchphrase, inasmuch as the loudness of panthers was proverbial; the DAP records the 19th century phrase "A-squallin' wusser than a painter."

peace (one's): I lay down last night, hopin' I would have my peace
(*Tom Rushen Blues*: 1929)

As used with a possessive pronoun, this construction is archaic standard English (OED).

police (n): She is up at night like a police on his beat.
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

In black speech, a policeman.

rattlesnake (to be like a): Just like a rattlesnake I stay Lordie, in a mamlish curl
(*Rattlesnake Blues*: 1929)

A slang term for a cheapskate (Son House); of unknown currency beyond Mississippi.

(to) reap what you sow: Cause that Good Book tells us you've got to reap just what you sow.
(*Pea Vine Blues*: 1929)

A paraphrase of Galatians 6:7: "..God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap," which in various forms has long been a proverbial saying.

religion (to get): I've got religion Jesus gonna make up my dying (bed).
(*Jesus Is A Dying-Bed Maker*: 1929)

To become very religious; an idiom dating to 1826 Partridge regards as a phrase of "insensitive vulgarity".

rider (n): I'm gonna find a rider, baby in the world somewhere.
(*Pony Blues*: 1929)

A sexual companion, or, as one informant puts it, "a fuck". Though a stock blues expression, it had no known currency in black speech or other slang. As a term for having sex, "ride" dates to the early 16th century (F&H).

right mind (to have one's): I ain't had my right mind I stay blue all the time.
(*Shake It And Break It*: 1929)

To be one's usual self, a sense found in the obsolete cliche, "clothed and in his right mind" (DC).

road (n): Out on the road, servin' out my time
An' the Delta women was tryin' to run me down.
(Circle Round The Moon: 1929)

Short for road gang.

saddle (n): Got a brand-new shetland, mare already trained
Better get (in) your saddle, tighten up on the reins.
(*Pony Blues*: 1929)

As slang for female genitals, *saddle* dates to the early 1600s (F&H). Its possible application in this couplet is indicated by the follow-up line: "A brownskin woman is like somethin' fit to eat."

saltwater (n): A donnay loves saltwater, she always wants a drink
(*Revenue Man Blues*: 1934)

Meaning obscure. In the mid-19th century "salted down" was slang for drunk (DAS).

say(s) (v) Says 'fore I stand your doggin' I'll sleep in a hollow log
(*Joe Kirby Blues*: 1929)

Given by Tucker as an "unmeaning and silly prefix to (a) sentence."

shake glad hands: I'm gonna shake glad hands, with your lovin' boy
(*Rattlesnake Blues*: 1929)

A variant of "give the glad hand", a slang term for "welcome" dating to 1914 (STY).

shake it and break it: You can shake it you can break it you can hang it on the wall
(*Shake It And Break It*: 1929)

This expression was reportedly a circus catchphrase dating to c. 1890 (Marshall and Jean Stearns: *Jazz Dance*: 1968).

shimmy (v): An' my rider got some way a-shimmyin', swear it just won't stop.
(*Love My Stuff*: 1934)

A euphemism for performing intercourse; from the suggestiveness of the dance, Shimmy-She-Wobble, the prefix of which was probably a corruption of "shimmer".

shimmies (n): An' I keep on tellin' my rider: "Keep our shimmies down."
(*Love My Stuff*: 1934)

An obscure, apparently euphemistic term for sexual activity.

short little (town): Boy they tell me the water, done took short little town.
(*High Water Everywhere, Part One*: 1929)

A black rural term for a small town. Its derivation is indicated by Leadbelly: ". . .'Well I'm way down here in a little place;' the place was so short it didn't

have a name, it was so little." *(Leadbelly's Last Sessions*: Folkways FA 2941, Volume 1).

sleep in a hollow log: Says 'fore I'll stand your doggin' I'll sleep in a hollow log.
(*Joe Kirby*: 1929)

To sleep outdoors; a dated black colloquialism enshrined in the song commonplace: "drink muddy water, sleep in a hollow dog".

sloppy drunk: I love to fuss an' fight
Lord an' get sloppy drunk offa Bottle n' Bond and walk the streets all night
(*Elder Greene Blues*: 1929)

A slang term for drunkeness dating to the late 1800s (S&E).

stay (v): I been to the Nation, Lord but I couldn't stay there.
(*Down The Dirt Road Blues*: 1929)

Live; cited in Faulkner's *The Mansion* (1955): "'Hidy, son,' he said, using the old country-Negroid idiom for live too: 'Which-a-way from here does Mr. Flem Snopes stay?'"

steal (v): Now Henry's gone, Johnnie don't you worry
He's stealin' some summer day.
(*Some Summer Day*: 1930)

A standard English word meaning to depart surreptiously for a place, more commonly used with "away" (OED).

stone pony: Got a stone pony, don't ride shetlands no more.
(*Stone Pony Blues*: 1934)

Cf. chapter seven.

study (v): Studyin' about my woman, could hardly coon my hand.
(*Jim Lee Blues, Part Two*: 1929)

To think or ponder; an archaic standard English term (OED).

stuff (n): I love my stuff(ie), I want it good an' hot.
(*Love My Stuff*: 1934)

As slang for copulation or genitals, this term became familiar in the mid-1900s (S&E). It may have derived from the superlative "hot stuff", which predated Patton's use of the expression.

tall as a cherry tree: She got a long tall husband, tall as a cherry tree, baby
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

An obscure variant of a nineteenth century figure of speech, recorded as "as tall and as straight as a poplar tree" (DAP). The cherry tree grows to a height of ten feet.

tell the world: I love my baby an' I
"tell the world I do."
(*When Your Way Gets Dark*: 1929)

A variant of "I'll tell the world," a catchphrase associated with American soldiers during World War One (DACP).

tellin': You don't need no tellin' mama I will, take you in my car.
(*Bird Nest Bound*: 1930)

Meaning obscure. In the above context it may have been used in the rare, archaic standard English sense of giving directions to a place (OED).

thirty-four: Ain't gonna tell nobody, "thirty-four" have done for me.
(*34 Blues*: 1934)

As an imperative, this expression means "Get away". See chapter ten.

thing (n): She gets up fore day an' she put the thing on me.
(*It Won't Be Long*: 1929)

A slang term for vagina dating to the seventeenth century (F&H).

this man: I got a woman, she long an' tall
The way she weepin' she makes this man bawl.
(*Going To Move To Alabama*: 1929)

Me; cited in the form of "this child" by Bartlett (1877), who regarded it as Western slang.

(to) throw (oneself) away: An' I remember one mornin', tween midnight an' day
I was way upstairs, throwin' myself away.
(*Jersey Bull Blues*: 1934)

A dated black idiom apparently meaning to lose self-possession or self-control. It was said of Scott Joplin: ". . .everyone had a lot of respect for Scott because he never threw himself away." (Blesh: *They All Played Ragtime*)

time: Lord I know, Lord I know my time ain't long.
(*Oh Death*: 1934)

Lifetime; time on earth. This idiom has a Biblical basis in Psalm 89:47: "Remember how short my time is. . ."

(to) turn one's face to the wall: If I woke up this mornin' jinks all around your bed
Turned my face to the wall an' I, didn't have a word to say.
(*Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues*: 1929)

To await death or undergo a death throes; a proverbial expression, used in *Barbara Allen*: "He turns his pale face to the wall/For death was on him dwellin'." At one time this posture was literally assumed by dying people: E.T.A. Hoffman asked to be turned to the wall during his death throes. The above couplet is an allusion to dying impenitent.

walk the streets: I love to fuss an' fight
Lord an' get sloppy drunk offa Bottle n' Bond
an' walk the streets all night.
(*Elder Greene Blues*: 1929)

A variant of the late 19th century slang phrase "stalk the streets", to seek a woman or sexual satisfaction (F&H).

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Appendix Three

Charlie Patton And The Scholastics

Though the past twenty years have brought Charlie Patton recognition as a towering blues figure, they have not necessarily brought about a clear understanding of Patton and his music. Indeed, the two typical views that govern assessments of Patton are fundamentally distorted, and only hinder any sensible understanding of his place within the scheme of blues history. The first of these views is that Patton was a "folk musician" playing a "folk form" of blues; the second consists of the notion that Patton was a blues pioneer who molded the "Mississippi blues". The former view is an intellectually dishonest attempt to fit Patton's music into an incongruous framework; the latter is simply historically and aesthetically invalid.

The view of Patton as a "folk artist" has primarily been propagated by John Fahey and David Evans, the latter of whom has attempted to document Mississippi blues in terms of a so-called "folk tradition". As one of his books states:

> . . .the blues have never outgrown their folk origins and indeed continue to draw on the folk tradition for sustenance. Most of the singers mentioned in this book participated in the commercial side of blues singing, yet. . .they were very much folk singers. (Evans: *Tommy Johnson*: November Books: London: 1970: p. 16. Hereafter cited as "Evans").

Yet Evans does not explain what is meant by such semantically obscure phrases as "folk origins," "folk tradition," or "folk singers," or demonstrate that the subjects of his study (who include Charlie Patton) fit such categories. He uses these terms as vaguely and opportunistically as record companies used the term "blues" in the 1920s.

When Evans elsewhere attempts to convey the meaning of these terms, he inadvertently demonstrates that they are meaningless jargon designed to justify an academic discipline that has no legitimate application to blues music. He offers the following definition of "folk music":

> . . .folk music is the product of a folk group within a larger society. . .It is transmitted orally within that group or between folk groups. (Evans: *Tradition and Creativity in the Folk Blues*: Ph.D. thesis submitted to the University of California, Los Angeles; 1976: p. 12. Hereafter cited as "Evans, 1976.")

This circular definition defines the mysterious component of the phrase under scrutiny (the "folk" of "folk music") in terms of the word ("folk") that makes it mysterious. It is tantamount to defining baseball as "a game played by baseball players". The definition of "folk group" that Evans separately invokes fails to distinguish such a group from any "non-folk" group and is thus semantically nonsensical. A "folk group", according to Evans, is "any group of people that shares oral traditions." (Evans, 1976: p. 3). By this definition, the entire population of the world constitutes a "folk group", for this all-inclusive group shares the "oral traditions" of language, marriage, cooking, child-rearing, funerals, and so forth.

Perhaps Evans categorizes musicians like Charlie Patton as members of a "folk group" on the premise that such a group shared a musical tradition, for terms like "blues tradition," "Drew tradition," and "traditional blues" routinely recur in his writings. If this perception is the basis of his assessment of Charlie Patton and other blues singers as "folk musicians," it rests on a misuse of the word "tradition". *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines "tradition" as an "Opinion or belief or custom handed down. . .from ancestors to posterity. . .". The *Oxford English Dictionary* similarly defines "tradition" as "That which is thus handed down; a statement, belief, or practice transmitted (esp. orally) from generation to generation." *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dicitonary Of The English Language* likewise defines "tradition" as "A long-established custom or practice that has the effect of an unwritten law; specifically, any of the uses of a school of art or literature handed down through the generations, and generally observed."

For the music of Charlie Patton to qualify as "traditional," it was necessarily derived from ancestral sources or previous generations, and perpetuated by his posterity. Nowhere in his writings does Evans imply that such was the case. Although he insists that Patton was part of what he arbitrarily terms the "Drew tradition", he uncovers no sources for a single Charlie Patton tune but generalizes: "The story of the Drew tradition begins around the turn of the century." (Evans, 1976: p. 338) By his faulty reckoning of Patton's birth year, this "tradition" began when Patton was nearly twenty years old. Moreover, it was already defunct when Evans "discovered" it in the 1960s: it did not even span the lifetime of most of its alleged exponents, including Patton.

Within the framework of Evans' own contorted definition, none of the blues he discusses warrant designation as "folk music". He manages to obscure the bankruptcy of his premise only by incessant repetition: the terms ""folk blues," "folk musician," "traditional blues," "Drew tradition," and "folk tradition" are ritualistically employed as scholarly catchphrases, with no attempt on Evans' part to explain how a "tradition" of "folk music" can span less than two generations.

It may be imagined that Evans attaches no time component to the term "tradition," but employs this word in the restricted, subordinate sense indicated by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "The action of transmitting or handing down, or fact of being handed down, from one to another, or from generation to generation. . ." In such an event, Evans has hit upon an obscure nuance of a conventionally understood word and substituted it for its generally understood meaning without informing his readers. Even if Evans uses "traditional" as an eccentric synonym of "derivative", this term would still have no legitimate application to the music of Charlie Patton. For despite his extensive research into the "Drew tradition," Evans does not name a single song that Charlie Patton derived from local sources. However "traditional" he may take Patton's music to be, the fact remains that he was unable to document its sources. He therefore has no justification for treating it as "traditional".

Evans appears to have a fuzzy view of what "folk music" means to him, let alone others. On the one hand he gives certain blues a pedigree on the basis of the process by which various musicians supposedly acquired their songs — namely that of "oral tradition". At the same time he bandies the term "folk blues" as though it were a descriptive piece of musical terminology, describing a musical product rather than a process. He thus divides blues songs into two dualistic categories: what he labels "folk blues" and the so-called "popular" blues (actually vaudeville blues) of singers like Bessie Smith. He fails to demonstrate that the "folk blues" of a Charlie Patton are older or less original than the "popular" blues of a Bessie Smith, or that the audience that bought their records made any meaningful distinctions between such performers. He rather places the "folk blues" on a mystical pedestal of his own devising; the "essence of the folk blues," he writes, is "telling the truth". (Evans, 1976: p. 120) Though he claims (on no evidence) that "The main aesthetic standard. . .for early folk blues was truth" he does not explain how the lyrics of "folk blues" exemplify "truth" or what "truth" means in the presumably non-philosophical sense that he applies it. As for his own view of the "blues tradition", it is certainly not "the truth" about blues or "folk music," simply because it equates the two on no grounds other than a personal, eccentric orthodoxy.

In their conventional usages the terms "folk music" and "folk singer" connote definite qualities, all of which pertain to the social rather than musical aspects of what "folk music" is commonly taken to be. "Folk music" is generally construed as traditional musical by virtue of its antiquity: it has ostensibly been handed down for generations. Obviously blues cannot meet this basic requirement of "folk music": its very existence prior to the years 1890-1900 is speculative. Moreover, the blues Evans categorizes as "folk blues" is guitar music, and the vogue for guitars among the blacks who performed this music clearly began in the early 1900s.

"Folk music" is supposedly the province of the masses; it requires no special aptitude and can be performed by any representative of the so-called "folk". As it was necessary to learn guitar in order to perform the blues documented by Evans, they do not fit the framework of "folk music" in this basic sense, however he seeks to obscure this incongruity by portraying blues as a non-musical exercise in "truth-telling". Were the essence of blues a matter of lyrics (as his murky equation between "folk blues" and "truth" implies), blues should have been primarily an *a cappella* music. Without exception, the "folk blues" singers Evans professes to document played guitar (or some other instrument); his research yielded no instances of *a cappella* Charlie Patton songs. Such a specialized music cannot qualify as "folk music" unless the meaning of the latter term is distorted to exclude all but the small minority of the so-called "folk" who are able to accompany songs on a guitar.

A "folk singer" is generally taken to be a typical representative of whatever group is designated by the nebulous term "folk". The fact that Charlie Patton and other blues singers were ostracized as "jukehouse people" and were considered socially disreputable as the result of their blues-singing demonstrates that blues was not a medium of "folk expression". The rejection of blues by what former jukehouse owner Elizabeth Moore termed "good people" (who included Patton's own father and daughter) illustrates that blues had no standing as "folk music," unless one takes the position that respectable blacks formed a socially deviant element of black society during the blues era. That Charlie Patton dramatized himself as an outcast (singing: "I can't feel welcome, rider nowhere I go" on *Stone Pony Blues*) and was reportedly popular only with the women who patronized his performances is ample testament to the blues' lack of standing as "folk music". Although Evans notes that "...folk blues have achieved acceptance within and been transmitted by only a segment of black Americans," (Evans, 1976, p. 4), he does not see this limited acceptance as having any bearing on the "folkishness" of blues music. When a banjoist who recalled the turn of the century advent of blues in his native area complained that the music appealed to "old drunkards...frolicing", Evans dismisses this

observation as "...the complaint of every older generation in America against the music of the young."(Evans, 1976, p. 110). Yet the banjoist is recalling the music of his own youth. Evans is oblivious to the fact that a "music of the young," as he puts it, is not "folk music" in any accepted sense of the term.

It is customary to regard the "folk singer" as an amateur outside "the commercial side" of blues singing. Evans not only winks at their professionalism in an apparent effort to preserve their "folk" stature; he falsely imposes amateurism upon them when he writes of the exponents of the "Drew tradition":

> Unless they were willing to travel or move to a larger town or city, they would always be, at best, semi-professional musicians. (Evans, 1970, p. 39).

Yet Charlie Patton (one of Evans' "folk" exhibits) functioned as a fully professional musician while living on the *Dockery* plantation, as well as during a three year sojourn on a nearby plantation at Cottondale.

Nowhere in his lengthy study of "folk blues" does Evans discuss blues-playing as a profitable endeavor, or give any hint that his subjects had the slightest interest in making money. One would infer from his writings that Mississippi bluesmen sang and played from the purest of motives: a love of "truth". Yet far from "participate" in the commmercial side of blues-singing, the Mississippi bluesmen of our acquaintance were preoccupied with it. In discussing his performances with Tommy Johnson (one of Evans' pet "folk blues" exhibits), Ishmon Bracey gloated: "You'd pick a guitar then. . .me an' old Tommy would play — just two guitars. We'd be *make some money*!"

By failing to acknowledge that blues-singing was a career (and a more lucrative one than farming) Evans is able to assess blues as a form of "folk music" rather than as a medium of entertainment. In the process professional and amateur musicians are treated as identical; the question of musical talent need never enter into Evans' inquiry, which gives the impression that sincerity was the sole requirement of blues-singing. Nor does Evans suggest that a given blues song might have circulated among various musicians because it had proven popular with the paying blues public; he regards such "transmissions" as an expression of blues's status as "folk" music.

A faulty syllogism pervades Evans' presentation of blues as "folk music," to wit:

Folk musicians play collective material.
Blues singers are folk musicians.
Therefore, blues singers play collective material.

But the conclusion of this implicit syllogism is actually its starting point. But for the fact that some blues musicians play or sing the same material as other

blues musicians, no one would imagine any correlation between blues and "folk music". The mental process that leads to the perception of blues as "folk music" is actually:

Blues singers play collective material.
Folk musicians play collective material.
Therefore, blues singers are folk musicians.

Such a conclusion is illogical: it is supported by mere analogy. Yet Evans' weighty deductions on the subject of blues appear to rest entirely on this non-sequitor.

It is characteristic of Evans' fuzzy approach to his subject that he gives no indication of having asked his "folk" subjects if they attempted to perpetuate a tradition, why they performed pieces they did not originate, or why they borrowed certain tunes from other musicians. Yet in the absence of such information the correspondence he points up between various musicians for the sake of asserting a "Drew tradition" is meaningless as musical documentary. He does not know whether a particular musician imitated another because the imitated musician was popular, because the imitator had tried (and perhaps failed) to compose his own music or create his own arrangements, or because the imitator regarded the music he copied as superior to some other piece of music, including his own. The result of these curious omissions is that Evans' "folk music" thesis is never tested against reality.

The premise that Patton and his colleagues were part of a "folk tradition" serves no practical purpose other than to give them a collective identity. It assumes not only that the resemblances that existed between such musicians are more noteworthy than the differences, but that these musicians were artistically equal. The question remains whether such collectivism is artificially imposed by researchers like Evans in an effort to make blues singers appear to conform to the dogmas of "folk music" studies, or whether it is an actual attribute of the musicians he discusses.

Instead of merely noting similarities between various blues musicians, Evans perceives such similarities as a virtue. For example, he castigates one writer for criticizing a blues singer's lack of originality, deploring all emphasis on individuality as a reflection of "the commercial aesthetic standard". (Evans, 1976: p. 207) The implication of this comment is that individuality is an artificial yardstick because it is alien to Mississippi blues singers: perpetuating "folk tradition," the latter make no attempt to be individual or original.

One of Evans' cardinal "folk" exhibits is Tommy Johnson, who supposedly learned Patton's *Pony Blues* while living near Drew. Over a year before Patton recorded, Johnson recorded Dick Bankston's lesser-known adaptation of Patton's song, *Bye Bye Blues*. The question arises: if Johnson attempted to work within or perpetuate a blues "tradition", why did he not record *Pony Blues*, the Delta's

most famous song of the period? Why record a relatively obscure imitation with a different title, different lyrics, an altered melody, and different phrasing? Why should Johnson allow himself to be listed as the composer of *Bye Bye Blues* (on the label credits of the record) when he actually copied the piece from Bankston? Why should Bankston remain unaware of Johnson's imitation until 1967, when he was interviewed in preparation for this study? Why should Johnson tell Ishmon Bracey (who believed the story, and repeated it in a 1964 interview for this study) that he invented *Pony Blues* and taught it to Patton? Why should Bankston himself alter *Pony Blues*, instead of recapitulating it?

The obvious answer to these questions is that blues musicians valued originality, Johnson doing so to the extent of surreptiously copying *Bye Bye Blues* and (like Willie Brown) misrepresenting himself as the originator of *Pony Blues*. That such musicians as Johnson and Brown may not have been capable of the originality they coveted does not make them "folk musicians," but simply derivative ones.

Though Evans likewise treats Charlie Patton as the reflection of a "folk tradition", Patton's known musical background belies this contention. The first piece Patton learned, *If You Take My Woman*, was not among the fifty-odd pieces he recorded. Were Patton a "folk musician" seeking to perpetuate a "tradition" he would have recorded this piece, which was doubtless acquired from a local musician. Had originality played no part in fostering his popularity, his sister should not have insisted that he "made up his own singing". Had Patton been eager to transmit his repertoire in the fashion of a "folk singer", his protege Booker Miller should not have balked at performing Patton pieces in his presence.

The "tradition" Evans professes to document supposedly tarred Patton, Tommy Johnson, Willie Brown and other performers he associates with Drew, Mississippi with the same musical brush. Though Patton never lived in Drew and was the dominant musical figure of the area around Drew, Evans insists on terming the "tradition" he posits as the "Drew tradition". He has no evidence to show that a single one of the blues themes he portrays as a reflection of this "tradition" originated in Drew or with a musician from Drew. Evans' use of this catchphrase not only imparts an illusion of coherence to his views but imparts a false importance to his own field work: the town he identifies as the Sumer of Mississippi blues is merely the one upon which he focused his own field research.

Were Evans' collectivism valid, one would expect to discover that the musicians he pidgeonholes as part of this "tradition" shared a common repertoire. Indeed, he claims as much, citing one informant to the effect that:

> . . .Patton, Brown, and Bankston all performed the same sort of blues. (Evans, 1970: p. 24).

Nowhere does he state what "sort" of blues these were, or specify what songs these musicians played in common. The source of Evans' assertion (LeDell Johnson) had no credentials as a public entertainer and was by his own account "half drunk all the time" he lived at Drew. (Evans, 1970: p. 24).

When Bankston himself was interviewed in preparation for this study, he reported that he played only a single Patton piece. Another member of this "folk fraternity" was Tommy Johnson, whom Evans wrongly portrays as Bankston's protege. Only two of Johnson's thirteen extant recordings are derived from Patton themes. Patton's own recordings show no indebtedness to Tommy Johnson's music.

The flimsiness of tangible connections between these three alleged mainstays of the "Drew tradition" demonstrates that there was no "Drew tradition" to speak of. That this "tradition" was created by Evans rather than the musicians he identifies with it is further indicated by his own curious approach to field work. Before Evans undertook his studies, the music of Charlie Patton was not considered "folk music" by those who collected it in the form of 78 RPM records. In 1963, Gayle Wardlow and record collector Bernard Klatzko conducted the first fruitful research into Patton's past. On that occasion Patton's sister Viola Cannon described him as an original musician who made up his own songs. Klatzko noted: "There is the alternative possibility that. . .Patton's themes were not invented by Patton. . .but were plantation folk airs. . .The burden of proof would be on anyone wishing to make this case, however." (Klatzko, notes to *The Immortal Charlie Patton*, Origin Jazz Library 7, 1964)

For reasons known only to himself Evans took this statement as a personal challenge. He recalls: "During August and September, 1967, I shouldered Klatzko's 'burden of proof' and. . .returned to Mississippi. . .in the hope of finding musicians. . .who could still play blues in the tradition of Patton. . ." (Evans, 1976: p. 29). Evans' choice of the word "tradition" betrays the fact that he did not "shoulder" any "burden of proof", but began his field research with a premise. Considering the aims of his research, it is not surprising that this research should appear to document a "tradition".

Though Evans subsequently interviewed Viola Cannon and cited her as a source of biographical information on Patton, his extensive writings on the "Drew tradition" contain no reference to her 1963 attestation of her brother's originality. One is forced to wonder why Evans omits this detail — which bears directly on his research — while giving no indication that any of the information

he gleaned from her is unreliable. Such selective use of an informant is scarcely the mark of a disinterested researcher attempting to document musical history.

It should be reiterated that as a result of Evans' quixotic labors not a single source of a single Charlie Patton tune, guitar arrangement, or lyric has been disclosed. Rather than acknowledge the futility of his research (from the standpoint of documenting his premise), Evans proceeded to adopt a terminology that made it unnecessary for him to "shoulder" a burden of proof, or demonstrate the validity of his iconoclastic views. By using ritual catchphrases like "Drew tradition" and presenting Charlie Patton within the context of this terminology, he accomplishes with language what he was or is unable to accomplish with research. Moreover, the language that serves as the means to this intellectually devious end is, as we have pointed out, itself nonsensical.

To give substance to the phantom tradition that Patton is taken to represent, Evans relies on a "body count" of local musicians, lumping together every performer who played in or near Drew as part of the "Drew tradition". By this means he identifies eight figures besides Patton, Bankston, Brown and Johnson as constituting the early (c. 1910-1919) "Drew tradition": Jake Martin, Mott Willis, Henry Sloan (who did not live in Drew), Cap Holmes (who left the area around 1916), Jack Hicks, Josie Bush, Jim Halloway, and Ben Maree. He does not specify which of these persons were professional musicians, or what they had in common as musicians. He associates Martin with this "tradition" while writing: "Most of his songs were designed for white audiences and were not blues. . ." (Evans, 1976: p. 344) He likewise associates Willis (a 1919 arrival) with it though he writes: "blues are only a part and not even his favorite kind of music." (Evans, 1976: p. 366). As for the remaining six musicians, Evans has no concrete information concerning their music other than an unattributed report that Maree played a *Pony Blues*.

As Evans does not know what six of his eight early exponents of the "Drew tradition" sounded like or even played as bread and butter pieces, he has no grounds for grouping them within an umbrella term. Yet despite the fact that the music he professes to document is virtually a cipher, he not only asserts that a "Drew" musical style existed, but also that he is able to describe it:

> There are also a number of interesting musical stylistic features that the Drew singers share. For instance, they all normally pick the guitar with the thumb and first two fingers. . .In their picking style they usually play only one string or chord at a time. . .(Evans, 1976: p. 449).

Unfortunately, Evans does not reveal how he developed his unique ability to describe the styles of musicians he has never heard. Even if there were a

factual basis for this description, none of its elements would amount to the makings of a musical style. To pick a guitar with a given number of fingers is not a "musical" feature; most blues guitarists, regardless of origin, used the three finger picking technique Evans associates with Drew. Contrary to what Evans implies, it is only possible for a guitarist to play a single chord at a time.

Although the repertoires of practically every performer lumped together in Evans' Drew "body count" are completely unknown, he goes on to assert:

> . . .The Drew performers play and sing many of the same things. . .(Evans, 1976: p. 461)

> . . .the blues of the Drew area were in many respects a communal product. . .(Evans, 1976: p. 364).

John Fahey likewise writes of "a great deal of communal creation" taking place in the Drew area (Fahey: *Charley Patton*: November Books: London: 1970:, p. 22. Hereafter cited as "Fahey"). Like Evans, he does not document these supposed instances of "communal" creation. Since "communal" creation of songs is often construed as a badge of "folk music", these authors thereby create the impression that Patton was a "folk musician" without actually demonstrating as much. But enveloping Patton within the catchphrases and catechisms of "folk music" studies does not envelope him within a real musical "tradition" – it merely raises questions about the methods of those who portray him in this fashion.

One of the indications that the methods of Evans and Fahey do not describe real events lies in their tendencies to portray these events ("communal creation," for example) solely in meaningless generality. As Fahey writes:

> . . .Patton was part of a large exchange process which went on for several years before his emergence as a prodigious recording star. . .(Fahey, p. 24).

Precisely what Patton exchanged with other musicians is left to the imagination. Evans writes of Patton:

> . . .he began learning to play guitar. . .with members of the Chatman (*sic*). . .family. . .At Dockery's he learned to play really well by following an older musician named Henry Sloan. . .Sloan played blues and was probably a major influence on the young Patton. (Evans, 1976: p. 339)

It is untrue that Patton played with members of the Chatmon family during the formative stages of his career, and there is no evidence that he learned anything specific from Sloan. Evans cites no source for the statement that Sloan played blues. Were Evans' claim that Patton learned to play "well by following Sloan" rooted in fact, Evans would have no reason to make Sloan's influence hypothetical by declaring it "probable".

The point of this passage is simply to situate Patton within "tradition", or what Fahey terms the "exchange process". By suggesting that Sloan was a "major influence" on Patton, Evans manages to write blues history without historical data. It is necessary for his "folk" thesis to insinuate that Patton was a derivative musician in this fashion; otherwise the Johnsons and Bankstons of his paper "tradition" would appear to be copying an original performer.

By assuming "tradition" where he is unable to demonstrate it, Evans merely succeeds in sloughing the "burden of proof" he claims to have assumed. Ultimately his Drew "tradition" amounts to nothing more than a scholastic shell game, hiding the pea of musicial originality beneath a slew of strained suppositions. It simply diverts attention from the fact that all of Patton's tunes were the product of someone's originality. Were it entertained that Henry Sloan devised Patton's basic themes, for example, the implication of this supposition would be to make Patton a derivative blues performer and Sloan an original one. In such an instance neither Sloan nor Patton would be "traditional" musicians performing "plantation folk airs".

Evans does not appear to recognize that music must be invented before it can be "transmitted". He seeks to raise the spectre of sourceless "folk music" by enmeshing each performer he discusses in interlocking "tradition". The refrain that results is a pompous parody of "The knee bone's connected to the thigh bone. . .".

> Tommy Johnson's connected to the Bankston bone
> Dick Bankston's connected to the Patton bone
> Patton's connected to the Sloan bone
> And they're all connected to the Drew bone.

In the process all of his "folk" exhibits appear to be equally imitative, and imitative of no one in particular.

Evans' attempts to insinuate Sloan into this nonsensical refrain have given license to other writers to go even further afield in fabricating blues history. Robert Palmer, who acknowledges Evans' "ideas and advice" in undertaking *Deep Blues*, writes therein:

> . . .Sloan was already playing blues in 1897, making him one of the first blues musicians anywhere. . .Patton dogged his every step. . .it's probably safe to surmise that Patton reworked Sloan's style. . .(Robert Palmer: *Deep Blues*: Viking Press: New York: 1981: p. 57. Hereafter cited as "Palmer").

He later makes the sweeping claim: ". . .Charley Patton learned blues from Henry Sloan. . ." (Palmer, p. 276) Yet there is no evidence that Sloan played blues in 1897 (or, in fact, was a blues singer), and none that Sloan had a discernable "style".

The upshot of Evans' labors is to reduce Patton to the status of a gear on a musical transmission belt. He writes:

> He was very influential in the area round Dockery's and taught many younger musicians. (Evans, 1970: p. 25).

Evans does not name the "many" musicians Patton supposedly taught, or specify what he taught them. Nowhere in his writings does he hint that Patton's playing is virtually impossible to duplicate or that musicians who attempted to copy him invariably simplified his music. Yet as the liner notes to a Patton resissue album point out:

> Patton's music. . .is almost impossible to imitate. It would take a lifetime to render his works with their original flavor. Few artists are as inaccessible to the modern imitator. Furthermore, none of the Delta bluesmen with whom Patton is generally (and carelessly) lumped. . .offer any comparable understanding of rhythm. (*Charlie Patton, Founder Of The Delta Blues*, Yazoo L-1020).

In Evans' distorted presentation of the Delta blues there is simply no place for a solitary musical sensibilty.

Evans' preoccupation with Patton's "influence" upon a "tradition" attests only to his own remoteness from his subject matter. With the exception of Patton's sister Viola Cannon (who claimed "he taught them all"), not a single informant interviewed in preparation for this study venerated Patton as a musical influence. Whether two musicians played the same motifs or whether one musician learned from another were matters that held no interest whatsover for the subjects of our study, who patronized or performed what Evans touts as "folk" music. They viewed blues-playing as a competitive rather than co-operative endeavor. Booker Miller, for example, dismissed Kid Bailey's *Rowdy Blues*

as merely an incompetent version of *Pony Blues*. Son House perceived Willie Brown as a better musician than Patton; that one influenced the other did not concern him. Patton himself thought of music in similar terms of oneupsmanship: he regarded himself (as Sara Garrett put it) as "the best in makin' music". The audiences of blues musicians did likewise. Were such not the case Patton's popularity would not have exceeded that of his peers; his record sales would not have surpassed those of such performers as Johnson, Bailey, and Walter Rhodes.

Evans disposes of this entire question in two sentences:

> Obviously some are perceived to be better than others by members of the folk group. But here we encounter differences in individual taste. The factors that determine taste are so varied and the result of so many other personal and contextual factors, that it is probably impossible to come to any conclusions that would be applicable to the folk group as a whole. (Evans, 1976: p. 546).

By presenting this critical issue as being too complicated to discuss in the course of a 594 page tome, Evans manages to convey the impression that no hierarchy existed among blues performers. He thereby avoids a simple acknowledgement that Patton was the most popular blues singer in the Mississippi Delta, whereas most of his pet "folk" subjects were nonentities.

Had Evans concerned himself with audience tastes, he could have discovered a simple explanation of what he takes to be a "folk tradition". According to Booker Miller, the tunes blues musicians played were those that their audiences requested at dances. Tommy Johnson's nephew Jack Cooper likewise said of him: "He always played what the people would ask him to play." (Johnson, he added, would not offer a tune at a live performance unless it had been requested.) Thus the most popular pieces in the repertoire of Charlie Patton were bound to be imitated by other provincial musicians, who faced a precarious professional existence unless they could satisfy audience requests.

That the musicians who are associated with Patton were not following a "tradition" but following the dictates of popular music is indicated by the selectivity of their imitations. Whereas *Pony Blues* was performed by numerous professional colleagues of Patton, such pieces as *Mississippi Bo Weavil, Green River Blues, When Your Way Gets Dark*, and *Some Of These Days* were not. So far as is known, not a single Mississippi blues singer besides Patton played them. A "tradition" that operates so selectively is not a tradition, no matter what Evans would have us believe.

If the claim that Patton was a "folk musician" operating within a "tradition" negates his accomplishments and exalts non-entities at his expense, the claim

that Patton molded the Mississippi blues credits him for a nonexistent achievement. This view rests on the supposition that there is something tangible enough to be termed a "Mississippi" or "Mississippi Delta" style of musicianship, and that Charlie Patton played such a style. When writers who hold this view discuss the musical features that supposedly distinguish Mississippi or Mississippi Delta blues, they invariably deal in stereotypes and meaningless musical generalities. For example, Robert Palmer writes:

> The Mississippi's Delta's blues musicians sang with unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to field hollers than it was to other blues. Guitar and piano accompaniments were percussive and hypnotic, and many Delta guitarists mastered the art of fretting the instrument with a slider or bottleneck. . .(Palmer, p. 44)

All blues are melodically circumscribed; all blues dance music is percussive. The singing of Delta blues performers is no more ornamented than that of non-Delta blues singers, and the claim that there is a stylistic link between Delta blues-singing and "field hollers" falsely suggests that there is some common denominator between "field hollers" other than the fact that they were sung *a cappella*. Bottleneck style guitar was uncharacteristic of Delta blues; it played no part in the recorded guitar work of such Delta artists as William Harris, Willie Brown, Kid Bailey, Arthur Pettis, Sonny Boy Nelson, and Mississippi John Hurt, and was peripheral in the blues of Memphis Minnie, the Delta's most widely-recorded performer. Finally, the "intensity" that Palmer sees as an attribute of Delta blues is nowhere evident in the singing of Bailey, Walter Rhodes, Petties, Nelson, Henry Sims, or John Hurt, who comprise nearly half the number of Delta singers who recorded in 1920's and 1930's.

Having given Delta blues an imaginary set of distinctive attributes, Palmer proceeds to give it an imaginary founder, Henry Sloan. He writes: "The earliest Delta blues seems to have originated. . .in the vicinity of the Will Dockery plantation. . ." (Palmer, p. 47) In the early 1900s, he says, "Several guitarists were living on the Dockery plantation and at least one of them, Henry Sloan, played a rough rhythmic sort of music. . .Charley (Patton) loved the new music and began following Sloan everywhere. . ."(Palmer, p. 51). In truth neither Palmer nor anyone else has any idea where Delta blues actually originated, whether Sloan played "rough rhythmic" music, whether this music was "new" music, or whether Patton (as he surmises) "reworked Sloan's style to suit his own expressive needs. . ." (Palmer, p. 57) On the basis of this supposed transformation, which has nothing factual to support it, Palmer goes on to

group Patton among the handful of entertainers who "created not just styles but dynasties. . ." (Palmer, p. 57) In the guise of writing history, Palmer has concocted a scenario that is on the level of a TV movie biography.

The grandiose view of Patton as a musical pioneer is likewise expressed by John Fahey:

> Patton was the bearer of more than one musical tradition; he was instrumental in the development of what later became known as the 'Country Blues'. (Fahey, p. 70)

How Patton helped create this genre is never explained. Indeed, if Fahey is to be believed, Patton was a derivative musician who had nothing original to contribute to "country blues":

> . . .his very distinctive singing and playing style came from growing up with the elder Chatmon brothers and presumably, their friends. Where these styles came from. . .cannot be ascertained. (Fahey, p. 20)

Nowhere does Fahey describe this "distinctive" style or point up a single resemblance between Patton and the recordings of two Chatmon brothers (Bo and Sam). Instead of discussing the style Patton imitated or fostered he invests ten pages in a discussion of Patton's lyrics (cf. Fahey, pp. 58-69) and over twenty pages in a discussion of the vocal intervals Patton employed (cf. Fahey, pp 32-34, and 38-58). At most he draws a broad comparison between Patton and Tommy Johnson:

> . . .both men recorded versions of *Pony Blues*. . .Both played in open G, 'Spanish tuning'; and not only did both use the same tune contour. . .but Johnson in his treatment. . .used virtually the same tune phrases as Patton employed in *Pony Blues*. (Fahey, p. 21)

In the process of reducing Patton's *Pony Blues* to a "version" of the song he popularized, Fahey makes a false equation between it and Johnson's version. The vocal phrases of the Patton song are nearly twice the length of Johnson's "virtually identical" tune phrases, and their accenting patterns are dissimilar.

It is significant that instead of discussing stylistic similarities between the two musicians, Fahey discusses a melodic similarity between two songs. For the resemblance between Patton and other known Mississippi blues singers only exists in terms of repertoire: he cannot be linked stylistically to any group

of musicians. The simple reason for this fact is that Patton does not display a generalized guitar style. His techniques and approaches vary even within a single song. At most Patton reveals a concept of guitar arrangement — that of periodically mimicking his vocal accenting with a guitar figure. It is precisely this trait (as well as a varied guitar touch) that is missing from the work of the blues musicians he is generally credited with influencing, such as Johnson, Willie Brown, Kid Bailey, and Son House. Nor do these singers use Patton's vocal technique of holding the final word of a phrase for several beats.

The evidence of recordings plainly indicates that Patton's material was often imitated; his treatment of his material had no appreciable effect on Mississippi blues. He created no dynasty, and was never rigid enough to work within a given guitar "style".

The unsubstantiated notion that Patton was a blues "pioneer" of some sort is largely based on a perception of him as a kind of gifted primitive, with unusual musical links to pre-blues music. Fahey, for example, claims:

> The pitches which Patton sings are to a great extent determined by two traditions. First, there are field hollers and religious songs. . .
>
> Most of Patton's songs come from the former (i.e., field holler/religious song) tradition. What Patton and others like him added to it was instrumental accompaniment. . .(Fahey, pp. 43-44)

Here Fahey misuses the word "pitch"; he is actually writing about the intervals that comprise Patton's songs. On the one hand, he claims that the tonal ingredients of these songs were derived largely from field hollers and religious songs; on the other hand he claims that the songs themselves were accompanied field hollers. At the same time, he fails to note a single correspondence between a Patton song and a field holler or religious song, or point out a single difference between Patton's use of "pitches" and that of other blues singers. He does not note a single musical characteristic of field hollers, which were not a musical genre as such, but a folkloristic term for *a cappella* black songs. To hold that Patton's songs were influenced by field hollers is to say nothing: field hollers (as recorded by the Library of Congress) have no intrinsic phrasing patterns or tonality.

The same empty erudition and pseudo musicology characterizes the writing of Robert Palmer, who claims to perceive a pre-blues phrasing pattern in what he terms Patton's "frequent use of thirteen-and-a-half bar verses." (Palmer, p. 65) The song he offers as an example of this pattern, *Pony Blues*, lacks a single

13 ½ bar verse: its various verses amount to 14, 13, 13, 16 ½, 13 and 16 ½ bars. Only two of the fifty-odd songs Patton recorded, *Green River Blues* and *Down The Dirt Road*, use 13 ½ bar verse patterns, and neither of them are similarly constructed.

Whereas Fahey sees Patton as having crawled out of the cottonfields to create a new tradition based on (depending on what page one is reading) the music of the Chatmons or field hollers, Palmer sees him as an exponent of "new" music that (unlike the older black music about him) perpetuates African traditions. He does not explain this paradox, but assures us that ". . .Most of the rhythmic devices Patton uses have counterparts in West African drumming, and he uses them in an African manner. . ." (Palmer, p. 64) He does not specify what these rhythmic devices are. One gathers that Palmer perceives a regularity in African drumming that has eluded other observers, for it has been written:

> African drumming, submitted to the most painstaking of auditions, simply does not break down into a structured rhythmic music; there are shifts of time and points and counterpoints of rhythm that make accurate notation impossible. (Barry Ulanov: *A History Of Jazz In America*: Viking Press: New York: 1952: p. 12).

On the other hand, all of Patton's secular material is performed in conventional 4/4 time.

Palmer's concrete references to Patton's music appear to spring completely from the author's imagination. Though none of Patton's songs involves a single guitar pattern, we are told: "Often he would keep a single guitar pattern going for thirty minutes or more. . ." (Palmer, p. 67) In drawing a parallel between Patton's blues and African music, he writes:

> . . .Patton's blues do have a narrow melodic range. Some, 'High Water Everywhere' and 'Moon Going Down' for example, have three note melodies. They're built around the tonic, the blue third, and the fifth. . .The music's harmonic content is almost nonexistent. . .changes from the I chord to IV and V are sketched in, but Patton rarely strums a full chord, not even a triad. He picks propulsive bass runs, interjects hammered percussive effects in the treble, and hits the sound box with his palm much more than he chords. (Palmer, p. 64)

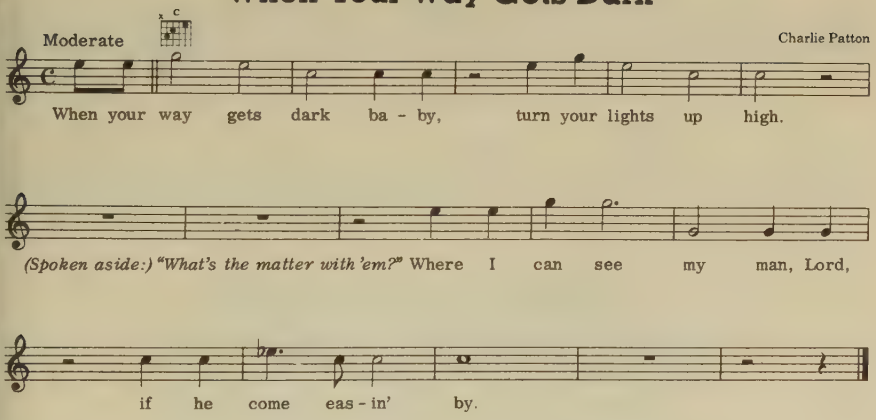
Only one of Patton's fifty-odd recordings, *Mississippi Bo Weavil*, has a three note melody; *Moon Going Down* uses seven vocal notes, and is more

melodically elaborate than most Chicago blues. From the standpoint of harmonic content, Patton's music is completely conventional within the blues idiom. Palmer's description of his musical style appears to be based on *High Water Everywhere*, the piece in which guitar-tapping is most prominent. In the first line of its first verse Patton strikes the body of his guitar during eleven consecutive beats (from the second beat through the twelfth) while playing a non-chordal guitar figure. He follows this section with a measure of I-I^7 chord strumming. Patton sounds a IV^7 chord on the third beat of the second phrase; holding its position, he sounds the chord episodically, on the sixth, ninth, and tenth beats of the same phrase. During an ensuing six beat tonic riff Patton strums full chords on the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth beats of the phrase. During the third vocal phrase, Patton strums a V chord for a measure (from the second through fifth beats). He concludes the stanza with another tonic riff that ends with two beats of chord strumming. Eleven beats of the verse thus feature guitar-tapping, along with single note playing; eighteen beats feature full chords. Contrary to what Palmer claims, his chordal work is thus more prominent than guitar-tapping. The effect of Palmer's careless effusions is to give Patton's music a falsely exotic, falsely primitive aura.

Appendix Four

Selected Songs

When Your Way Gets Dark



When your way gets dark, baby, turn your
lights up high,
(*Spoken:* What's the matter with 'em?)
Where I can see my man, Lord, if he come
easin' by.

I take my daily,
(*Spoken:* Daily 'fore day prayer!)
I take my daily . . .

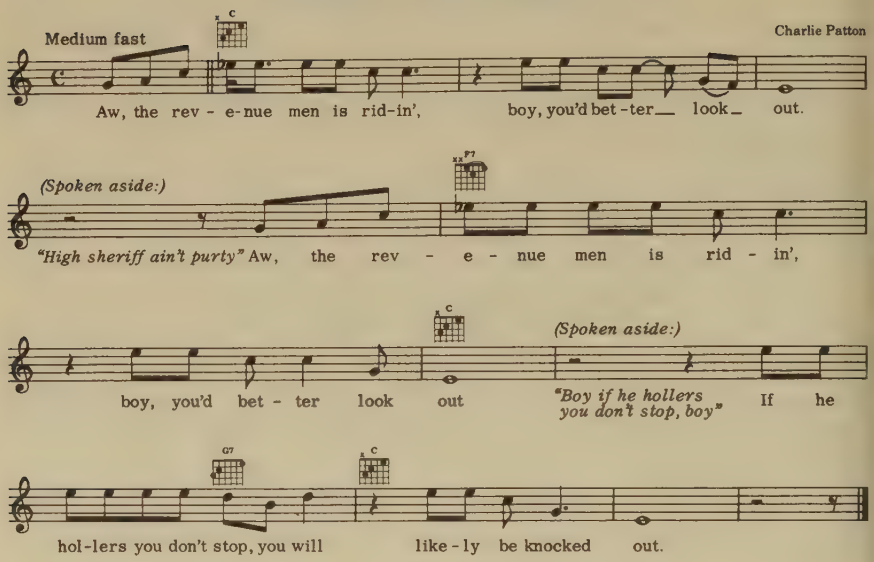
Trouble at home, baby,
(*Spoken:* Tryin' to blow me down!)
It wouldn't hurt so bad but the news
all over this . . .

I love my baby an' I
(*Spoken:* Tell the world I do)
What made me love her, you will come an'
love her, too.

Hey, someday, baby,
(*Spoken:* You know, an' it won't be long)
You'll call at me, baby, an'—an' I'll be gone.

I'm goin' away, baby,
(*Spoken:* Don't you wanna go?)
I'm goin' away, baby, don't you wanna go?

Revenue Man Blues



Aw, the revenue men is ridin', boy, you'd better look out,
(*Spoken:* High sheriff ain't purty)
Aw, the revenue men is ridin', boy, you'd better look out,
(*Spoken:* Boy, if he hollers you—you don't stop, boy)
If he hollers you—don't stop, you will likely be knocked out.

Oh, a donay love saltwater,* well, she always wants a drink,
(*Spoken:* Got to have a drink!)
A donay love saltwater, she always wants a drink,
(*Spoken:* Boy, if they see you with a bottle, though)
If they see you with a bottle, they will almost break your neck.

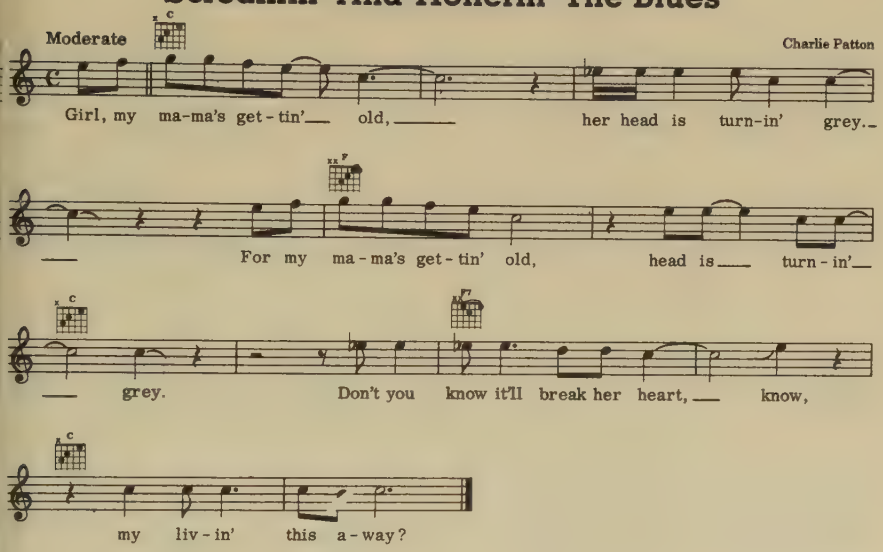
Go safe sweet home through, Lord, that shiny star,
(*Spoken:* Aw sho'!)
I say, safe sweet home through that shiny star,
(*Spoken:* She don't need no tellin's, daddy, aw sho')
She don't need no tellin', daddy will take you in his car.

Oh, come on, mama, let us go to the edge of town,
(*Spoken:* Aw sho'!)
Come on, mama, let us go to the edge of town,
(*Spoken:* Baby, I know where there's a bird nest built at)
I know where there's a bird's nest built down on the ground.

Oh, I wake up every mornin' now, with a jinx all around my bed,
(*Spoken:* Aw sho'!)
I wakes up every mornin' with a jinx all around my bed,
(*Spoken:* You know I'll have them jinx forever!)
I have been a good provider but I believe I have been misled.

*A "donay" is defined by Son House as a "no-good woman"; "saltwater" is an archaic synonym for alcohol.

Screamin' And Hollerin' The Blues



Jackson on a high hill, mama, Natchez just below,*
Jackson on a high hill, mama, Natchez just below,
I ever get back home, I won't be back no more.

Girl, my mama's gettin' old, (her) head is turnin' gray,
For my mama gettin' old, head is turnin' gray,
Don't you know it'll break her heart, know, my livin' this a-way?

Ever woke up in the mornin', jinx all around your bed?
Ever woke up in the mornin', jinx all around your bed?
(*Spoken:* Children, I know how it is, baby)
Turned my face to the wall an' I didn't have a word to say.

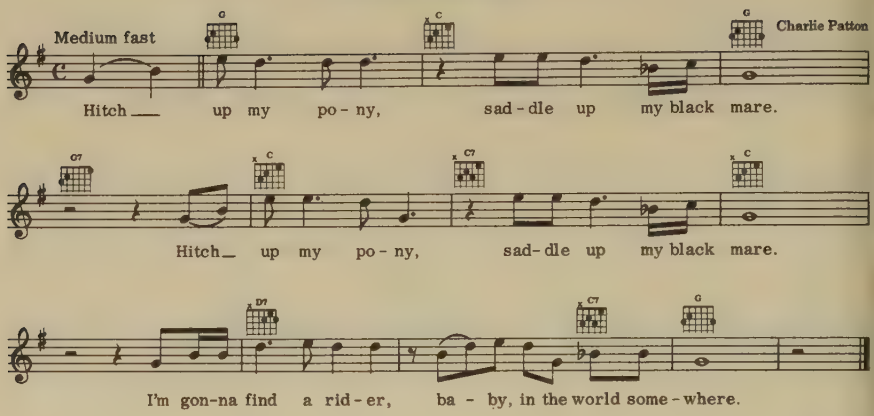
No use a-hollerin', no use screamin' and cryin',
No use of hollerin', no use of screamin' and cryin',
For you know you got a home, mama, long as I got mine.

Hey, Lord have mercy on my wicked soul,
Oh, Lord have mercy on my wicked soul,
I wouldn't mistreat you, baby, for my weight in gold.

Goin' away, baby, don't you wanna go?
I'm goin' away, sweet mama, don't you wanna go?
(*Spoken:* I know you wanna go, baby!)
Take God to tell when I be back here anymore.

*The unintelligible vocal aside that follows this line is probably a disclaimer, since it is Vicksburg that blues singers conventionally (and correctly) situate on the high hill.

Pony Blues



Hitch* up my pony, saddle up my black mare,
Hitch up my pony, saddle up my black mare,
I'm gonna find a rider, baby, in the world
somewhere.

"Hello Central, the matter with your line?
Hello Central, matter, Lord, with your line?"
"Come a storm last night an' tore the
wire down."

Got a brand new Shetland, man, already trained,
A brand new Shetland, baby, already trained,
Better get a little saddle, tie the loops†
on your rein.

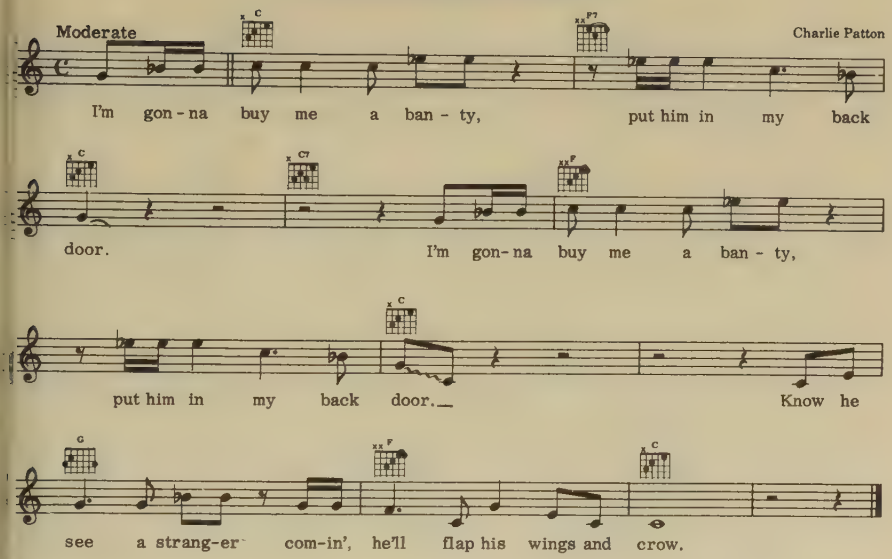
Ain't a brownskin woman like somethin'
fit to eat?
Brownskin woman like somethin' fit to eat?
But a jet-black woman, don't put your hands
on me.

Took my baby, go meet the mornin' train,
I took my baby, meet that mornin' train,
An' the blues come down, baby, like
showers of rain.

I've got somethin' to tell you when I get
the chance,
Somethin' to tell you when I get a chance,
I don't wanna marry, just wanna be your man.

*For reasons known only to himself, Patton pronounced "hitch" as though it were spelled "hit-itch."
†It is unclear whether Patton sings "tie the loops" or "tighten up."

Banty Rooster Blues*



I'm gonna buy me a banty, put him in my back door, (twice)
Know he see a stranger comin', he'll flap his wings and crow.

What you want with a rooster, he won't crow 'fore day? (twice)
What you want with a man when he won't do nothin' he say?

What you want with a hen won't cackle when she lay? (twice)
What you want with a woman when she won't do nothin' I say?

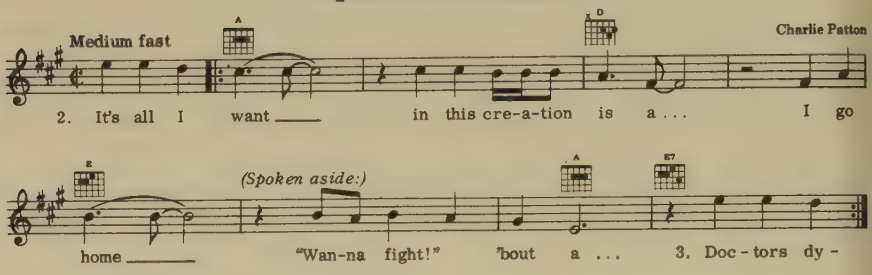
Aw, take my picture, hang it up in Jackson Wall,† (twice)
If anybody asks you, "What's about it?" Tell 'em, "That's all, that's all."

My hook in the water and my cork's on top, (twice)
How can I lose, Lord, with the help of God?

I know my dog anywhere I hear him bark, (twice)
I can tell my rider if I feel her in the dark.

*Assuming that they are sequential, the first three couplets of this song would seem to depict a cuckold, with the second and third verses given over to his rejoinders to a skeptical wife and rival.
†Jackson Wall is presumably a barrelhouse. It has been reported that Mississippi barrelhouses of the twenties often featured pictures of local blues attractions.

Spoonful Blues



Spoken:
I'm about to go to jail about this spoonful.

In all a spoon', 'bout that spoon',
The women goin' crazy every day in their life 'bout a . . .

It's all I want in this creation is a . . .
I go home (*spoken:* wanna fight!) 'bout a . . .

Doctors dyin' (*spoken:* way in Hot Springs!) just 'bout a . . .
These women goin' crazy every day in their life 'bout a . . .

Would you kill a man dead? (*spoken:* Yes I will!) just 'bout a . . .
Oh babe, I'm a fool about my . . .

(*Spoken:* Don't take me long!) to get my . . .
Hey baby, you know I need my . . .

It's mens on Parchman (*spoken:* done lifetime) just 'bout a . . .
Hey baby, (*spoken:* You know I ain't long) 'bout my . . .

It's all I want (*spoken:* honey, in this creation) is a . . .
I go to bed, get up and wanna fight 'bout a . . .

(*Spoken:* Lookey here, baby, would you slap me? Yes I will!) just 'bout a . . .
Hey baby, (*spoken:* you know I'm a fool a-) 'bout my . . .

Would you kill a man? (*spoken:* Yes I would, you know I'd kill him) just 'bout a . . .
Most every man (*spoken:* that you see is) fool 'bout his . . .

(*Spoken:* You know baby, I need) that ol' . . .
Hey baby, (*spoken:* I wanna hit the judge 'bout a) 'bout a . . .

(*Spoken:* Baby, you gonna quit me? Yeah honey!) just 'bout a . . .
It's all I want, baby, this creation is a . . .

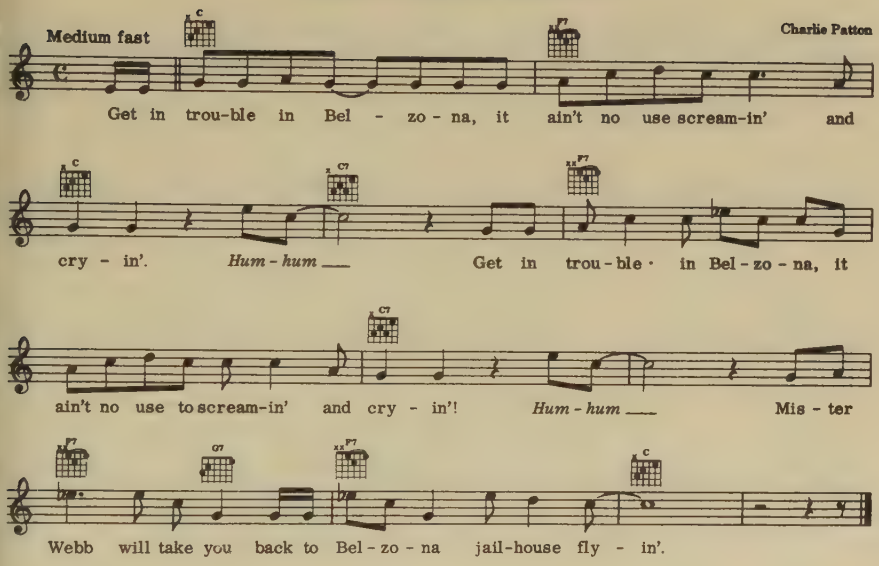
(*Spoken:* Lookey here, baby, I'm leavin' town!) just 'bout a . . .
Hey baby, (*Spoken:* you know I need) that ol' . . .

(*Spoken:* Don't make me mad, baby!) 'cause I want my . . .
Hey baby, I'm a fool 'bout that . . .

(*Spoken:* Lookey here, honey!) I need that . . .
Most every man leaves without a . . .

Sundays' mean (*spoken:* I know they are) 'bout a . . .
Hey baby, (*spoken:* I'm sneakin' around here) and ain't got me no ...
Oh, that spoon', hey baby, you know I need my . . .

High Sheriff Blues



Get in trouble in Belzona,* it ain't no use screamin' and cryin',
Get in trouble in Belzona, it ain't no use to screamin' and cryin',
Mr. Webb will take you back to Belzona jailhouse flyin'.

Let me tell you folkses how he treated me,
Let me tell you folkses how he treated me,
An' he put me in a cell, Lord, it was dark as it could be.

Lay there late one evenin', Mr. Purvis was standin' 'round,
Lay there late one evenin', Mr. Purvis was standin' 'round,
Mr. Purvis told Mr. Webb to let poor Charlie down.

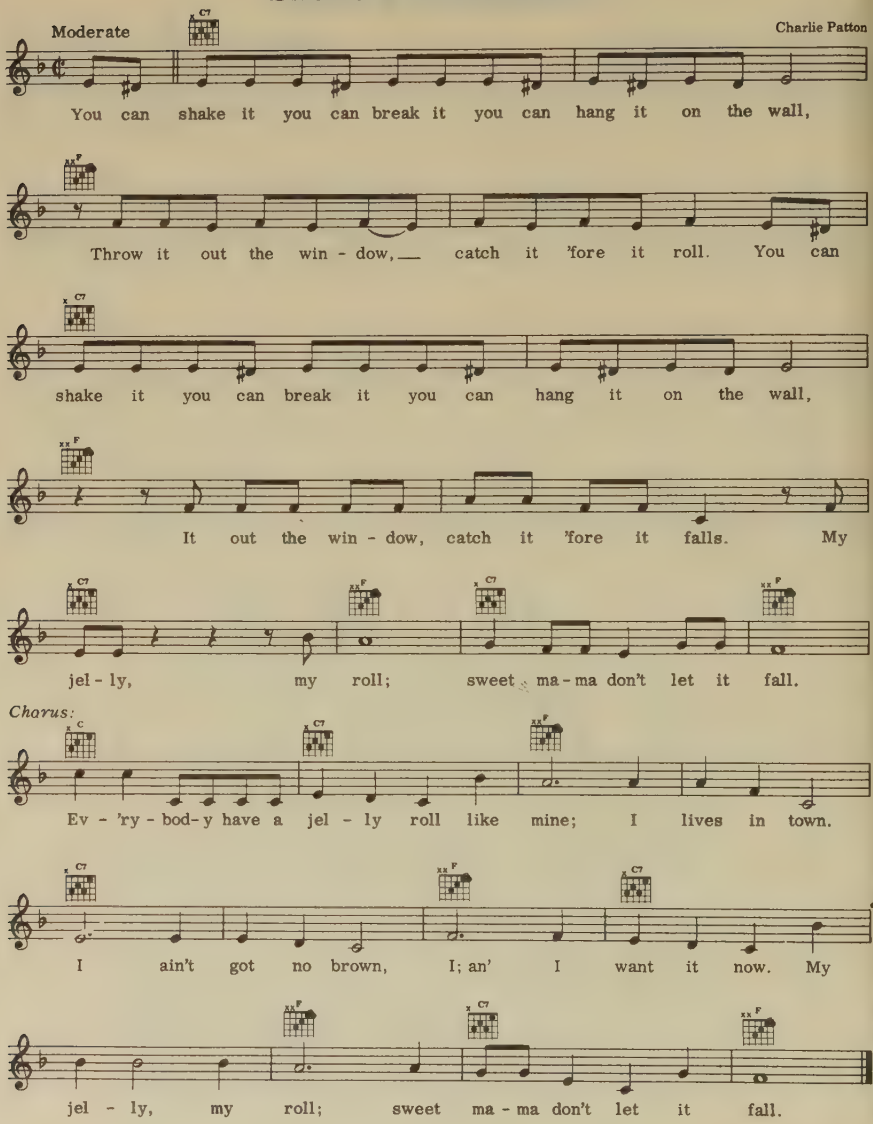
It takes boozy boo', Lord, to cure these blues,
Takes boozy booze, Lord, to cure these blues,
But each day seems like years in a jailhouse where there is no boo'.

I got up one mornin', feelin' awful . . .
I got up one mornin', feelin' mighty bad,
Fella, it must not a-been them Belzona jail I had.
(*Spoken:* Blues I had, boys.)

Oh, Lord, in trouble, ain't no use to screamin' . . .
When I was in prison it 'tain't no use to screamin' and cry,
Mr. Purvis the onliest manager, he just pay no mind.

*The town of Belzoni, Mississippi, was originally named Belzona and was so called until around 1920.

Shake It And Break It



You can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
Throw it out the window, catch it 'fore it roll.
You can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it falls.
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

Chorus:
Everybody have a jelly roll like mine, I lives in town,
I—ain't got no brown, I—an' I want it now.
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

You can snatch it, you can grab it, you can break it, you can twist it,
Any way that I love to get it.
I—had my right mind sihce I—I blowed this town,
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

Jus' shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it falls.
You can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it . . .
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

Chorus:
I ain't got nobody here but me and myself,
I—stay blue all the time, aw, when the sun goes down.
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

You can shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it fall.
You can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch . . .
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

You can snatch it, you can grab it, you can break it, you can twist it,
Any way that I love to get it.
I—had my right mind, I—be worried sometime,
'Bout a jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

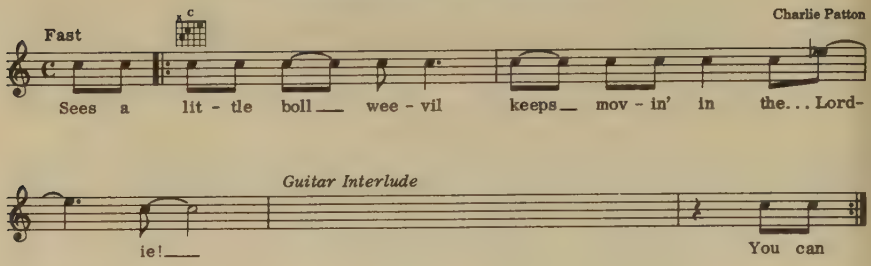
Just shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it falls.
You can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it falls.
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

Chorus:
I know I been to town, I—I walked around.
I—start leavin' town, I—I fool around.
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

Just shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it falls.
You can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it . . .
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it fall.

Chorus:
Jus' shake it, you can break it, you can hang it on the wall,
. . . it out the window, catch it 'fore it . . .
My jelly, my roll, sweet mama, don't let it . . .

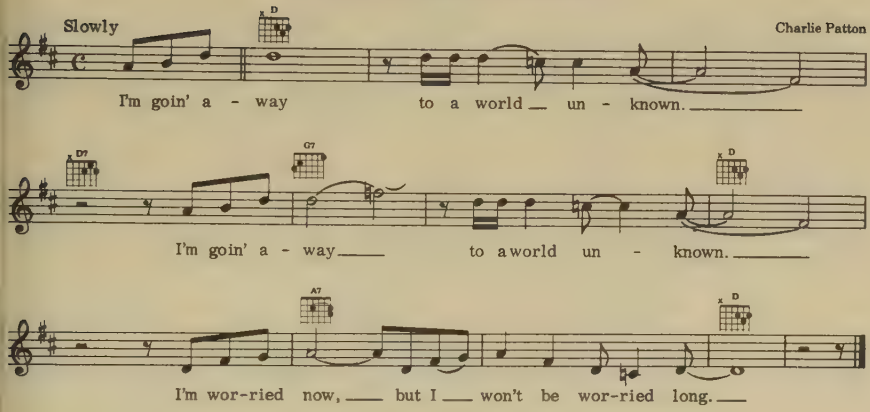
Mississippi Bo Weavil*



Sees a little boll weevil keeps movin' in the . . . Lordie!
You can plant your cotton and you won't get a half a bale, Lordie.
Bo weevil, bo weevil, where's your native home? Lordie,
"A-Louisiana raised in Texas, least is where I was bred and born," Lordie.
Well, I saw the bo weevil, Lord, a-circle, Lord, in the air, Lordie,
The next time I seed him, Lord, he had his family there, Lordie.
Bo weevil left Texas, Lord, he bid me "fare ye well," Lordie,
(*Spoken:* Where you goin' now?)
"I'm goin' down the Mississippi, gonna give Louisiana hell," Lordie.
Bo weevil said to the farmer, "'Tain't got ticket fare," Lordie,
(*Spoken:* How is that, boy?)
Suck all the blossom and he leave your hedges square, Lordie,
The next time I seed you, you know you had your family there, Lordie.
Bo weevil meet his wife, "We can sit down on the hill," Lordie,
Bo weevil told his wife, "Let's trade this forty† in," Lordie,
Bo weevil told his wife, says, "I believe I may go North," Lordie.
(*Spoken:* Hold on, I'm gonna tell all about that.)
"Let's leave Louisiana, we can go to Arkansas," Lordie.
Well, I saw the bo weevil, Lord, a-circle, Lord, in the air, Lordie,
Next time I seed him, Lord, he had his family there, Lordie.
Bo weevil told the farmer that "I 'tain't got ticket fare," Lordie,
Sucks all the blossom and leave your hedges square, Lordie.
Bo weevil, bo weevil, where your native home, Lordie?
"Most anywhere they raise cotton and corn," Lordie.
Bo weevil, bo weevil, "Oughta treat me fair," Lordie,
The next time I did you had your family there, Lordie.

*"Weevil" was so spelled on the original issue of this song by Paramount Records.
†*forty:* forty acres of land

Down The Dirt Road



I'm goin' away to a world unknown,
I'm goin' away to a world unknown,
I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long.

My rider got somethin', she's tryin'a keep it hid,
My rider got somethin', she's tryin'a keep it hid,
Lord, I got somethin' to find that somethin' with.

I feel like choppin', chips flyin' everywhere,
I feel like choppin', chips flyin' everywhere,
I been to the Nation,* oh Lord, but I couldn't stay there.

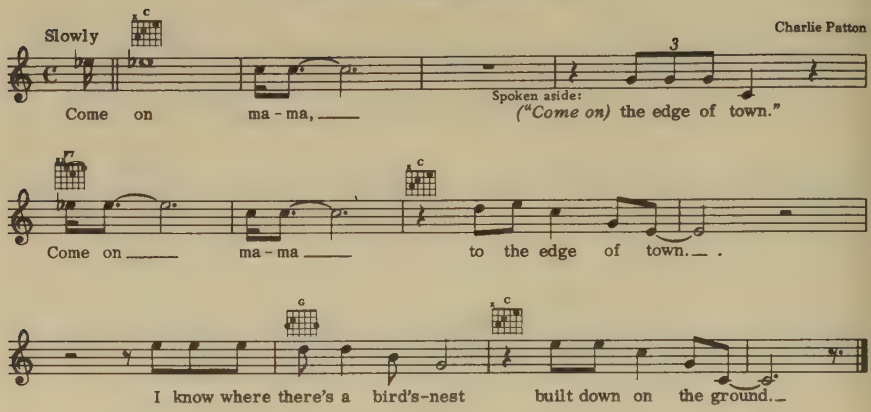
Some people tell me them oversea blues ain't bad,
(*Spoken:* Why, of course they are)
Some people say them oversea blues ain't bad,
(*Spoken:* What was a-matter with 'em?!)
It must not a-been them oversea blues I had.

Every day seem like murder here,
(*Spoken:* My God, I'm no sheriff)
Every day seem like murder here,
I'm gonna leave tomorrow, I know you don't bid my care.

Can't go down any dirt road by myself,
Can't go down any dirt road by myself,
(*Spoken:* My Lord, who you gonna carry?)
I don't carry my (rider?), gonna carry me someone else.

**Nation:* The "Indian Nation" now Oklahoma; a nineteenth-century term.

Bird Nest Bound



Come on, mama, (*spoken:* Come to) the edge of town,
Come on, mama, to the edge of town,
I know where there's a bird's nest, built down on the ground.

If I was a bird, mama . . .
If I was a bird, mama, I would, I'd nest in the heart of town,
(*Spoken:* Lord, you know I'd live in the heart of town)
So when the town get lonesome I'd be bird nest bound.

Hard luck is at your front door, blues are in your room,
Hard luck is at your front door, blues are in your room,
Callin' at your back door, "What is gonna become of you?"

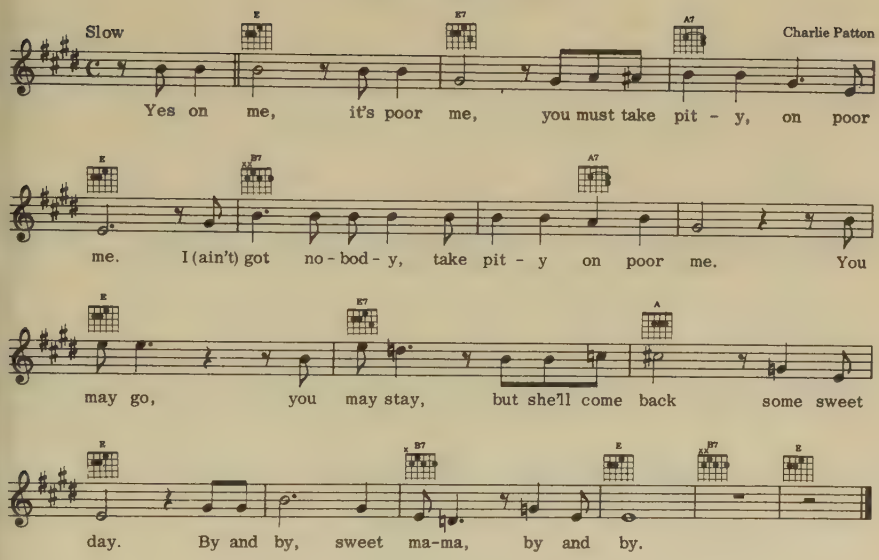
Sometime I say I need you, then again I don't,
Sometime I say I need you, then again I don't,
(*Spoken:* You know it's the truth, baby)
Sometime I think I'll quit you, then again I won't.

Oh, I remember one mornin', stand in my baby's door,
(*Spoken:* Sure boy, I was standin' there)
Oh, I remember one mornin', stand in my baby's door,
(*Spoken:* Boy, you know what she told me?)
"Looka here, papa Charlie, I don't want you no more."

Safe sweet home, sweet home baby, through that shiny star,
Safe sweet home now through, aw, that shiny star,
You don't need no tellin', mama, I will take you in my car.*

*This line is preceded by an unintelligible vocal aside.

Poor Me



Yes on me, it's poor me, you must take pity on poor me,
I (ain't) got nobody, take pity on poor me.
You may go, you may stay, but she'll come back some sweet day,
By and by, sweet mama, by and by.

Don't the moon look pretty shinin' down through the tree?
Oh, I can see Bertha Lee,* Lord, but she can't see me.
You may go, you may stay, but she'll come back some sweet day,
By and by, sweet mama, baby won't you, by and by?

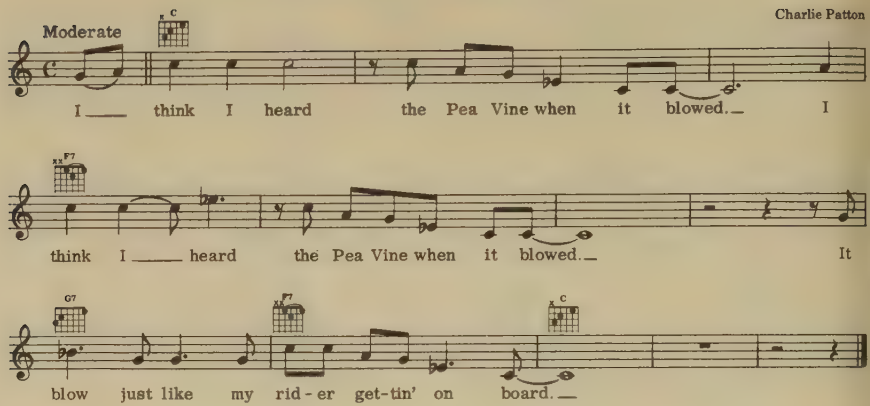
You may go, you may stay, but she'll come back some sweet day,
By and by, sweet mama, by and by.
Yes on me, poor me, you must have pity on poor me,
I ain't got me nobody, take pity on poor me.

Don't the moon look pretty shinin' down through the tree?
Oh, I can see Bertha Lee, but she can't see me.
You may go, you may stay, but she'll come back some sweet day,
By and by, sweet mama, oh baby, won't you, by and by?

*Bertha Lee was Patton's girl friend and recording partner in the early 1930's.

Pea Vine Blues*

Charlie Patton



I think I heard the Pea Vine when it blowed,
I think I heard the Pea Vine when it blowed,
It blow just like my rider gettin' on board.

Well, the levee sinkin', you know I, baby . . .
(*Spoken:* Baby, you know I *can't* stay!)
The levee is sinkin', Lord, you know I cannot . . .
I'm goin' up the country, mama, in a few more days.

Yes, you know it, she know it, she know you done done me wrong,
Yes, you know it, you know it, you know you done done me wrong,
Yes, you know it, you know it, you know you done done me wrong.

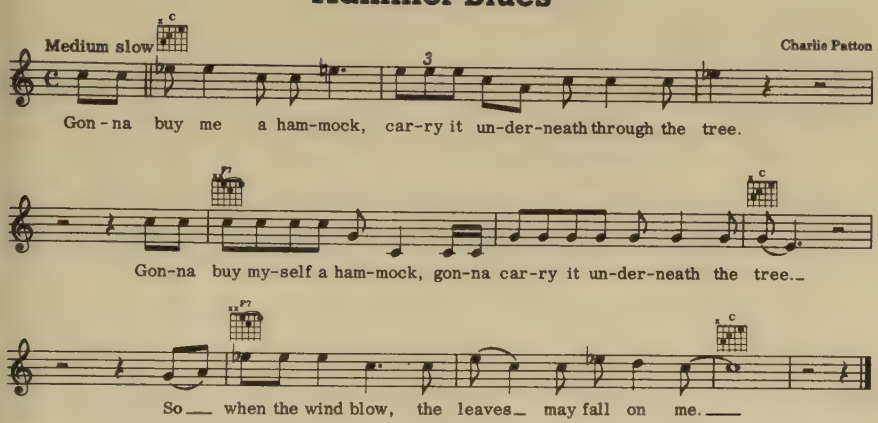
Yes, I cried last night and I ain't gonna cry anymore,
I cried last night an' I, I ain't gonna cry anymore,
'Cause the Good Book tells us you've got to reap just what you sow.

Stop your way o' livin' an' you won't . . .
(*Spoken:* You won't have to cry no more, baby!)
Stop your way o' livin' an' you won't have to cry anymore,
Stop your way o' livin' an' you won't have to cry anymore.

I think I heard the Pea Vine when it blowed,
I think I heard Pea Vine when it blowed,
She blowed just like she wasn't gonna blow no more.

**Pea Vine:* A Mississippi Delta train on the famous "Dog" (Y&MV) line.

Hammer Blues*



Gonna buy me a hammock, carry it underneath through the tree,
Gonna buy myself a hammock, gonna carry it underneath the tree,
So when the wind blow, the leaves may fall on me.

Go on, baby, you can have your way,
Ball on, baby, you can have your way,
Sister, every dog sure must have his day.

Got me shackled, I'm wearin' a ball and . . .
They've got me shackled, I'm wearin' my ball and chain,
An' they got me ready for that Parchman† train.

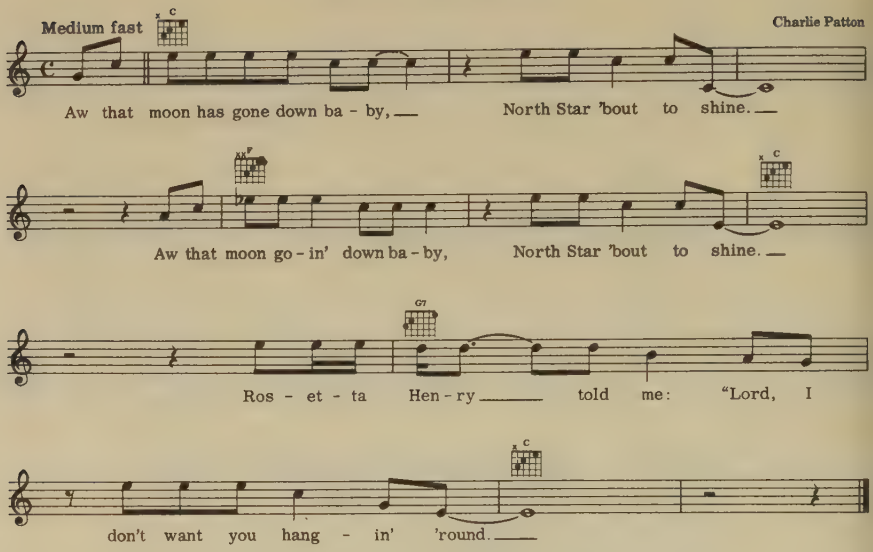
I went to the depot, I looked up at the board,
I went to the depot, I looked up at the board,
If this train has left, well, it's tearin' off up the road.

Clothes I buy, baby, honey, you gonna 'pre—, . . .
You're gonna appreciate, honey, all (the) clothes I'll buy,
I will give you all my lovin', baby, till the day I die.

I went way up Red River, crawlin' on the . . .
I went up Red River, crawlin' on a log,
I think I heard the *Bob Lee*‡ boat when she moaned.

*As the first verse indicates, this song was mistitled when it was issued by Paramount Records.
†*Parchman:* the state prison in Parchman, Mississippi, whose escapees often wandered into Patton's native Dockery, a Delta plantation town.
‡*Bob Lee:* one of the steamships operated by the Lee Line of Memphis.

Moon Goin' Down



Aw, that moon has gone down, baby, North Star 'bout to shine,
Aw, the moon goin' down, baby, North Star 'bout to shine.
Rosetta Henry told me, "Lord, I don't want you hangin' 'round."

Oh well, where were you now, baby, Clarksdale mill burned down?*
Oh well, where were you now, babe, Clarksdale mill burned down?
(*Spoken:* Boy, you know where I were)
"I were way down Sunflower† with my face all fulla frowns."

They's a house over yonder, painted all over green,
They's a house over yonder, painted all over green.
(*Spoken:* Boy, you know I know it's over there!)
Some of the finest young women, Lord, a man most ever seen.

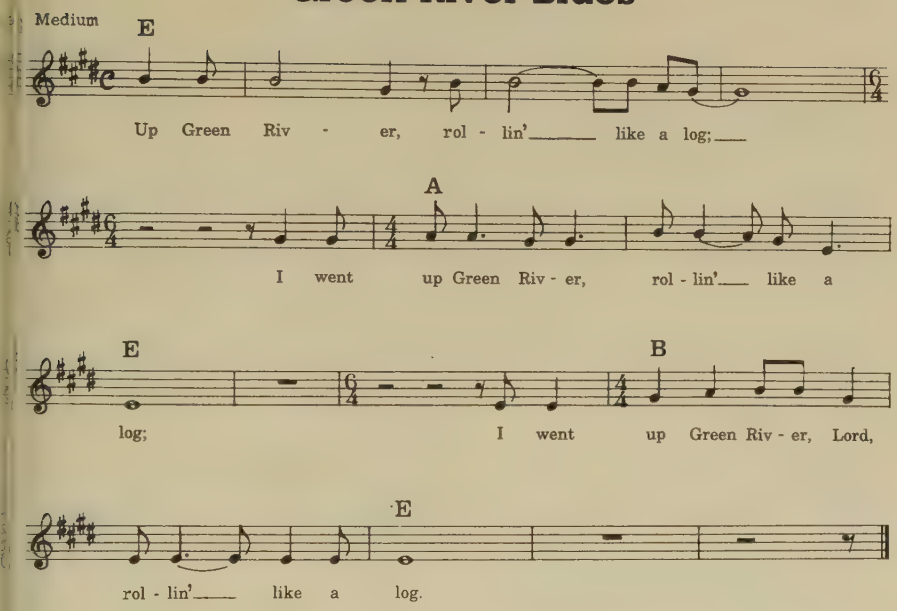
Lord, I think I heard the Helena whistle, Helena whistle,
Helena whistle blow,
Lord, I think I heard the Helena whistle blow.
(*Spoken:* Well, I hear it blowin' now)
Lord, I ain't gonna stop walkin' till I get in my rider's door.

Lord, the smokestack is black and the bell it shine like,
bell it shine like, bell it shine like gold,
Aw, the smokestack is black and the bell it shine like gold.
(*Spoken:* Shuckin' boy, you know it looks good to me)
Lord, I ain't gonna walk here, tarry around no more.

Hey, hey, evenin' was at midnight when I heard the local blow,
Aw, was evenin' at midnight when I heard the local blow.
(*Spoken:* Boy, I'm gettin' lonesome . . .)
I got to see my rider when she gettin' on board.

*The upper Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale suffered a serious fire in 1899.
†Whether Patton means the river, the town, or the county of Sunflower is unclear.

Green River Blues



Up Green River rollin' like a log
I (wade) (went) up Green River rollin' like a log
I (wade) (went) up Green River lord, rollin' like a log.
Think I heard the Marion whistle blow
I think I heard the Marion whistle blow
And it blew just like my baby gettin' on board.
I'm going' where the Southern cross the Dog (3).
Some people say the Green River blues ain't bad (2)
Then it must not a been them Green River blues I had.
It was late one night, everything was still
It was late one night baby, everything was still
I could see my baby up on a lonesome hill.
How long, evening train been gone?
How long baby, that evening train been gone?
Yes I'm worried now, but I won't be worried long.
I'm goin' away know it may get lonesome here
I'm goin' away baby you may get lonesome here.
Yes I'm goin' away babe may get lonesome here.

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